V 41 #1

The Hudson Review

305
V2

40th Anniversary Issue

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
APR 23 1988
IRVINE
LIBRARY

Louis Simpson
The Poet's Theme

Frederick Brown
Zola and Manet: 1866

Robert S. Clark
"I Don't Like Modern Music"

Kermit Moyer
Ruth's Daughter—a story

Carl Wooton
A Reconciliation—a story

William H. Pritchard
The Trouble with Ernest

Alice Bloom • Bert Cardullo • James Finn Cotter • Dean Flower • Harry Goldgar • Emily Grosholz • Donald Hall Richard Hornby • Gary Krist • Robert McDowell • William Park • Gilberto Perez • Marcia B. Siegel • Charles Tomlinson

81
75561 64805 1

A magazine of literature and the arts

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New from STANFORD

Fiction in the Archives
Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France

Natalie Zemon Davis. "A brilliant and fascinating book with rich implications for students of both literature and history." —*Stephen Greenblatt.* Illustrated. $22.50

Works and Lives
The Anthropologist as Author

Clifford Geertz. An intellectual tour de force that examines, as writing, works of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edward Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict. $19.95

Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings

Edited, with an Introduction, by Mark Poster. Translated by Jacques Mourrain. The first comprehensive overview of the work of one of the most fascinating thinkers on the French intellectual scene. Cloth, $32.50; paper, $10.95

The Freudian Subject

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen. Translated by Catherine Porter. Foreword by François Roustang. "A masterly book . . . indispensable to all future studies of Freud."—*Jean-Luc Nancy.* $29.50

The Quadrille of Gender
Casanova's Memoirs

François Roustang. Translated by Anne C. Vila. A leading French psychoanalyst develops a new method of psychoanalytic reading, in a study of an "anti-Don Juan" seducer. $25.00

The End of Kinship
'Measure for Measure,' Incest, and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood

Marc Shell. A brilliant examination of economic, literary, and kinship exchange, which reaches beyond Shakespeare's drama to basic themes in Western culture. $32.50

Transmemberment of Song
Hart Crane's Anatomies of Rhetoric and Desire

Lee Edelman. "The first criticism I've read of Crane that describes the poetry I know and love."—*Harold Bloom.* $32.50

Leo Spitzer: Representative Essays

Edited by Alban K. Forcione, Herbert Lindenberger, and Madeline Sutherland. Foreword by John Freccero. "Leo Spitzer is one of the greatest comparatists of this century. . . . His genius will be obvious to anyone who reads even a single page of the splendid essays collected here." —*Joseph Frank.* $35.00

Prices subject to change.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Literature, Theory, and Cultural Studies

Job
The Victim of His People

René Girard. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Drawing upon scriptural exegesis, anthropology, and literary criticism, this commanding interpretation of the book of Job discusses the question of sacrifice as the driving force of culture. $22.50

Violence and Truth
On the Work of René Girard

Edited by Paul Dumouchel. Girard's work has completely modified the landscape of the social sciences, and this volume of 14 essays is the first to address the power of his contribution in interdisciplinary and comparative terms. $32.50

The High Medieval Dream Vision
Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form

Kathryn L. Lynch. A redefinition of the dream vision form that attends to its role in contemporary philosophical debate. $35.00

The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers
Volume I, 1920–1928

Edited by Tim Hunt. This is the first of four lavishly designed volumes that will constitute the first definitive edition of Jeffers's completed poems. $60.00

The Excesses of God
Robinson Jeffers as a Religious Figure

William Everson. Foreword by Albert Gelpi. An event of rare literary distinction, this book records the conjunction between two distinguished American poets. $29.50

The Tale of the Heike

Translated, with an Introduction, by Helen Craig McCullough. A stunning translation of one of the masterworks of Japanese literature. Illustrated. $60.00

The Miner

Natsume Sōseki. Translated, with an Afterword, by Jay Rubin. "A delightful surprise . . . Rubin has had the perception to see the specialness of a neglected work and has rescued it from undeserved obscurity."—*Phyllis Lyons.* $29.50

Stanford University Press
STANFORD, CA 94305

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

VOLUME XLI NUMBER 1 SPRING 1988

40th Anniversary Issue

ESSAYS

Zola and Manet: 1866 — FREDERICK BROWN — 71
The Poet's Theme — LOUIS SIMPSON — 93

FICTION

Ruth's Daughter — KERMIT MOYER — 19
A Reconciliation — CARL WOOTON — 45

POETRY

Carlotta's Confession — DONALD HALL — 143
The Fifties — ROBERT McDOWELL — 147
Pines; The Butterflies; Far Point; Parking Lot; The Santa Fe Railroad; The Cycle — CHARLES TOMLINSON — 156
Prothalamia — EMILY GROSHOLZ — 161

CHRONICLES

Music — ROBERT S. CLARK — 167
Modern music, from Tanglewood to "Nixon in China"
Dance — MARCIA B. SIEGEL — 177
"Le Sacre du Printemps," "Nixon in China," "Mahabharata"
Theatre — RICHARD HORNBY — 182
"Into the Woods," "Anything Goes," "Burn This"
Film I — BERT CARDULLO — 189
New films from Britain
Film II — WILLIAM PARK AND GILBERTO PEREZ — 197
"Fatal Attraction"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fiction DEAN FLOWER 209
Richard Ford, Joyce Carol Oates, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala
Poetry JAMES FINN COTTER 225
A. R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, C. H. Sisson

REVIEWS
The Bible under the Critic's Loupe HARRY GOLDGAR 203
"The Literary Guide to the Bible"
The Trouble with Ernest WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD 218
"Hemingway," by Kenneth Lynn
What We Talk about When We Talk about Writing GARY KRIST 233
"Interviews with American Authors of the 1980s"

REPORT
Cold Spring Nights in Maine, Smelts, and the Language of Love ALICE BLOOM 6

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS 240

TO OUR READERS

The Editors of THE HUDSON REVIEW are pleased to announce the appointment of Dana Gioia as Advisory Editor and of Bert Cardullo as Contributing Editor for Film. Dana Gioia, a poet and businessman, has been a frequent contributor to the THE HUDSON REVIEW. Bert Cardullo is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Richmond.

Publication of this special issue is supported by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. We wish to express our appreciation to this organization.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORS: Paula Deitz, Frederick Morgan

MANAGING EDITOR: Ronald Koury

ASSISTANT EDITOR: Suzanne Pratt

ADVISORY EDITORS: Hayden Carruth, William H. Pritchard, Frederick Brown, Sonya Rudikoff, Dean Flower, Emily Grosholz, Dana Gioia

ASSOCIATE: Vincent M. Macchia

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS: Marcia B. Siegel *(Dance)*, Robert S. Clark *(Music)*, Richard Hornby *(Theatre)*, Bert Cardullo *(Film)*

THE HUDSON REVIEW is published quarterly by The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10021. It is a member of The Council of Literary Magazines, and is indexed in the Social Sciences and Humanities Index. Book reviews are indexed in Book Review Index, and poems in Index of American Periodical Verse.

Subscription $18.00 per year in U. S.; foreign including Canada $21.00. Single copy $6.00. Special rate for bulk orders. U. S. A. Newsstand Distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, Ohio 44870. Library subscriptions in England: Periodicals Division, B. H. Blackwell Ltd., P. O. Box 40, Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford. Back issues and reprints of Volumes I—XXXIX available from AMS Press, Inc., 56 East 13th Street, New York, N. Y. 10003. Microfilms of Volumes I—XXXIX available from University Microfilms, Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. We handle directly all requests for permission to photocopy.

We urge individual and library subscribers to inform us promptly of address changes to insure the continuity of their subscriptions. Claims for missing issues will not be considered after one year from date of publication. We regret that we cannot provide refunds on canceled subscriptions.

Unsolicited mss will be read according to the following schedule: *Nonfiction*: January 1 through March 31, and October 1 through December 31; *Poetry*: April 1 through September 30; *Fiction*: June 1 through November 30. Unsolicited mss received at other times will be returned unread. Manuscripts submitted by subscribers who so identify themselves will be read throughout the year. Manuscripts will not be returned nor will inquiries be answered unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. No responsibility is assumed for their loss or injury.

Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Editors.

Printed in the United States of America. Second Class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Registered U. S. Patent Office.

Copyright © 1988 by The Hudson Review, Inc. ISSN 0018-702X

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

AFTER THE LOST WAR

A NARRATIVE

ANDREW HUDGINS

"As a marriage of poetry and fiction, this highly readable narrative combines the best of both forms into an intensely moving history. **An Epic achievement."**
—*Publishers Weekly*

"How rare to see poetry with this kind of extraordinary narrative power! The book simply soars, and Andrew Hudgins is **a great poet."** —**Pat Conroy,** novelist

"If there is a better book of poems published this decade, I do not know of it. With this [book] Andrew Hudgins makes his mark on American poetry indelible."
—**Richard Selzer,** essayist and short story writer

"Written with as much heart as mind, by turns bawdy, sorrowful, loving, and grotesque, it brings the full human creature to the page. *After the Lost War* is an American classic. **Andrew Hudgins becomes the most readable poet of his generation."**
—**Rodney Jones,** poet

Praise for Andrew Hudgins' first book of poetry, *Saints and Strangers:*

"It is rare to find poetry in which powerful feelings are so honestly and imaginatively conveyed."
—**James Dickey,** novelist and poet

"Andrew Hudgins's poems are extraordinary: simple, direct, *available,* yet profound, deeply religious, loving, and compassionate."
—**Doris Grumbach,** novelist and biographer

Houghton Mifflin Company
Two Park Street Boston, Massachusetts 02108

$12.50 (cloth only)

©1988 Houghton Mifflin Company

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Report:

Cold Spring Nights in Maine, Smelts, and the Language of Love

"Gettin' any?"
"Nope."
"Checked out the other end yet?"
"Nope."
"Aren't goin' through Flying Pond are they?"
"How about Four Corners?"
"Nope. Nothin'. Might not be tonight."
"Christ Almighty, my feet are freezing already," says Hilde, our friend.

Hilde is tall for a woman but she also weighs more than she would like to. She is thinking of going on the Zen Macrobiotic rice and vegetables diet because eating Weight Watchers is too expensive, but right now she's sucking a Tootsie-Roll lollipop to which she is lately addicted. It's a night in late April. The snow is still deep in places but spring is here. We have parked on a back road, which at this point skirts a large black pond, to talk to some other fishermen; but now she and my husband and I are headed down a path into the woods alongside the pond. It's ten o'clock at night; we are carrying a Coleman lantern, a net on a long stick, and a bucket. We are following, between snow banks and down a muddy path, an invisible, rushing, splashing stream to the point where it feeds into the larger waters. We are after smelts.

We—my husband and I—have never caught or eaten a smelt and when, weeks later, we finally do, there isn't much to them. They're too small to gut or bone. Cut off the heads, dip them in egg then corn meal, fry them fast, and the little bones crunch right up like potato chips. We've been smelting every night for a week, under a full navy sky, a foam of stars, a small white hard moon, cold hard winds, and all around us every night the freeway roar of invisible, just released water. It's that invisible roar that we hunt.

We've been ice-locked since November, not a sound in our world but wind and cold birds, not a movement visible but wind and birds, bare trees, cars, and chimney smoke. But now it's spring and melting, all heaved up, and we're out in it, the nightly chase of the elusive smelts which don't swim, but "run." But when? If we're at the right place the right night, we'll get enough fish for breakfast the next day.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets

The Way Down

John Burt

The poems collected here are narrative, telling stories that turn on some small but crucial shift of sensibility. One hears in them a speaking rather than a singing voice, a voice which, for all its formality and gravity, remains oral and sociable, a voice which tells things rather than spins charms. Their predominant mood is lucid asperity, sometimes breaking out into the angry Calvinism they always barely keep down, sometimes striving to achieve a humane skepticism that always just eludes them. *80 pages*

Paper: $9.75 ISBN 0-691-01443-4 Cloth: $17.50 ISBN 0-691-06727-9

River Writing

An Eno Journal

James Applewhite

James Applewhite describes these poems as the "waves emanating from the gravitational fall of my runs by the Eno river, and other travels, into a self I could not otherwise know. They are my repetitive song of belief in the possibility of presence in language." *60 pages*

Paper: $8.95 ISBN 0-691-01442-6 Cloth: $17.50 ISBN 0-691-06726-0

Wall to Wall Speaks

David Mus

David Mus is an expatriate American who lives in France and Italy. *Wall to Wall Speaks* is his first book-length manuscript to be published in the United States.

Most of these poems first appeared in *Poetry* magazine in the decade from 1967 to 1976 and quickly became underground classics. Brought together here—with more recent work—they reveal their coherence and their urgency. *112 pages*

Paper: $10.95 ISBN 0-691-01444-2 Cloth: $18.95 ISBN 0-691-06728-7

AT YOUR BOOKSTORE OR

Princeton University Press

41 WILLIAM ST • PRINCETON, NJ 08540 • (609) 452-4900

ORDERS: 800-PRS-ISBN (777-4726)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We have never eaten fried fish for breakfast, but are willing to go along with most anything these days, any new rules or news, because we're "from away," fresh from fifteen years lived in Midwestern faculty ghettoes where, by and large, people tended not to go fishing with buckets and nets at ten o'clock at night. Anything now seems possible. Every night all the possible places must be checked.

These smelts run through at small water mouths, where one lake feeds into another or a stream narrows into a pond. A bridge makes a good spot. The mouth funnels all the smelts together so that if you're there when they come through that spot, all of a sudden the cold water is replaced by what looks like one shivering silver animal, oily with life, thousands of smelts, each no longer than a small hand, all running through at once, headed out, no slackers.

You can't smelt in the daytime because you can't see them. Lantern, in this case, is a stronger beam than sun. Like so much other lore about living in the country, this turns out to be true. The sap won't run when the wind blows, either, and the sap stops running at night. Birch logs burn good. My first batch of maple sap turns into sludge on the stove. The second batch turns to lumps that would crush healthy molars. I want so much to be here. I bottle up jars of each, take them to town for advice. The first person I ask, Carl, looks at the jars, shakes them, holds them up to the light, shakes his head, hands them back to me, says, "well, I think you must of tapped a hog." The thing about lore is that there's so much of it, and you don't know any of it because you never needed it before, and then you hear a piece of it and it happens. Or, you do it.

As we stumble through the woods, my husband going ahead with the lantern, me in the middle, Hilde behind, the person of Bart Stone figures in the general air of spawning, breaking up. Hilde, watching in the lantern's erratic swing for deep mud, and sucking the lollipop, confesses, and cheerfully so, to "going almost all the way" with Bart Stone, "several times."

"When?" I scream back. "How? Where?"

"In a dark corner," shouts Hilde, pulling the sucker from her mouth with a pop. "At the party after Town Meeting!"

"*That's* why you didn't want to leave!"

"At your party last week, too!"

'Where?"

"By the front room door!"

"Does that unnerve you?" I yell. (Her husband Everett is out of town, taking his parents someplace. Otherwise, Everett would be with us tonight.)

"Nope!" Hilde yells. "Should it?"

Voices, clank of lantern handles and buckets, slog and suck of mud, lights ahead through the trees. Roar of wind and water, moonlight, the fish. Where are they plotting up? What rush of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ILLINOIS SHORT FICTION

Beyond This Bitter Air

Sarah Rossiter "There is a progression from a brambly tangle of dark loneliness in the early stories to streaks of light and welcome open places in the later ones. . . . Tightly written and beautifully though sparely observed, these stories convince and chill." – Elizabeth Spencer, *New York Times Book Review.* $11.95

Legacies

Nancy Potter "*Legacies* ought to be required reading for all serious creative writing courses. What can be learned from this slim volume of 14 stories? Simply this: how to achieve remarkable effects in short fiction without gimmicks, surprises, or posturing." – Robert Atwan, *New York Times Book Review.* $11.95

Scenes from the Homefront

Sara Vogan "The style of the excellent stories is as tough and agile as a good pair of legs. . . . You'll be entranced at how Ms. Vogan uses the intricacies of the natural world to bolster, inform, explore, and create an external validation for the lives of her characters." – Molly Peacock, *New York Times Book Review.* $11.95

Singing on the *Titanic*

Perry Glasser "As the *Titanic* sank, the passengers on board sang hymns—surely an affirmative act in the face of impossible odds. Glasser's characters respond with the same optimism, their actions colored by the experience of loss or by the precariousness of their inner balance." – Elizabeth Gleick, *New York Times Book Review.* $11.95

Order at your local bookstore, or from

University of Illinois Press

c/o CUP Services • P. O. Box 6525 • Ithaca, New York 14851

607/277-2211 • Major credit cards accepted.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blood or signal do they obey, and how do they know it? One night, a week ago, all of a sudden, the frogs are back—spring peepers. It doesn't begin with one or two peeps a night, then several more the next, building to a chorus, but all at once, all peepers where there was nothing but silence, wind, snow. When we walk outside the kitchen door that night to smell the new wind, there the peeps are, coming from the swamp down the dirt road. "Listen to that," someone says, "the frogs thawed out." Is that lore? Have they? I would have thought they had just been born.

"What I'd do if I was doin' it, is, I'd glue her in the joints first. But do it in the back. If you don't she's not gonna take the stain even and wherever she's got that glue on her is gonna show up like a sore thumb when you stain 'er."

"How'm I gonna keep 'er stain from gettin' on the wall then, get somebody else to do it?"

The old gent looks around the hardware store to see if we'll all laugh at this witticism. We all do.

"Stain her first," says the hardware clerk, "stain 'er first, then nail 'er together. She goes right up. Looks real good."

I can't resist. "I wonder," I say softly, "how come men talk about boats and cars and engines and stuff, projects, I guess, as 'she,' 'her,' do you think?"

"Never noticed," says the old gent, "just do I guess."

"Women don't, at least I don't think so," I say.

"Maybe," he winks at the clerk, "may be 'cause women don't have no projects!"

I haven't learned how to boil syrup but I've learned a little something about keeping my mouth shut. Women, I think, refer to projects as "the," or "it," or "my," as in "I take my material and lay it this way on the bias," or as "your" as in "first you take your flour then work your lard into it until your dough is real fine crumbed." I have not yet heard a woman refer to an engine or to a pie as having any particular sex at all. "Gimme a quarter-inch drill bit, please," I say, wanting to add, "she broke yesterday while I was tapping a hog," but I don't.

If I'm willing to believe I'll behead fish to fry them for breakfast, I'm willing to sit at the feet of nearly any lore. "Yes-ma'm's, he had some trouble drivin' over the yes-ma'ms," says a man about his son who's just home from the hospital, his back, industrial accident, been operated on. Out the first day, coming home a hundred miles in the car, he had trouble when his wife, driving, hit the "yes-ma'ms."

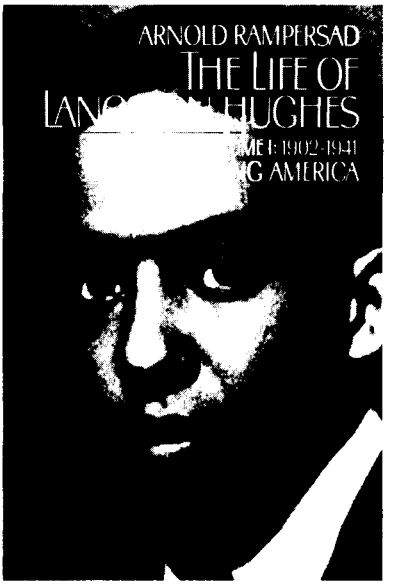
"What did you say?"

"The . . . the ups and downs, the, what do you call it the potholes, the little dips and such, you know. Always called them the 'yes-ma'ms' but don't have *any* idea why."

Lore makes cosmic sense, I'm sure of it. And it makes visions,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"THIS IS A BOOK I HAVE WAITED HALF A LIFETIME FOR."
—Alice Walker



"Excellent....Mr. Rampersad [leaves] you eager to see what he makes of the rest of the story, and confident that his second volume will be as good as his first."
—John Gross, *The New York Times*

"An exquisite orchestration of the fully lived life."
—Michael S. Harper, *Boston Globe*

"This first volume...sparkles.... [It] has the appeal of an easy-reading novel."
—Gwendolyn Brooks, *The New York Times Book Review*

THE LIFE OF LANGSTON HUGHES

Volume I: 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America

ARNOLD RAMPERSAD

"A near-perfect example of the biographer's art, balanced and thought-provoking."
—Kirkus Reviews

"Throughout this comprehensive and enthralling account of Hughes's life and his development as a writer, Rampersad offers a precise assessment of his work and its importance....This may be the best biography of a black writer we have had."
—David Nicholson, *The Washington Post Book World*

480 pp.; photos paper $9.95

At better bookstores or directly from
OXFORD PAPERBACKS
Oxford University Press
200 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the vision of this nightly smelting event is one of overlapping nets: the fish spread, submerged, invisible, dog-paddling probably, waiting, unfocused, ungathered, just thawed out, maybe. About to gather, about to pour and tumble together through chutes of stream and creek mouths, about to become a net. But now they're lying, patternless, in a net of lakes and ponds. We wait. The water, thawed out, now everywhere, makes a net; threading and pouring from one lake into another, from new mud to trickle to creek to pond to river to the mighty ocean, all the water connected and spreading out under the net of blowing black naked trees, under the net of the sky, the stars at steady random, a million sparkling fish above us.

Between these nets we creep, us fisherfolk, following lore and the once a year craving for this spring tonic, this rank, oily, bony titbit of a fish; crossing paths, moving up back roads, across bridges, stopping out on broken docks, on mushy ice floes, driving to the next spot, getting out of the car, walking, lantern-lit, lantern bobbing, checking, peering, waiting, not talking much, moving off again, back into the car, all with our dots of light like fireflies in late June. A patient, eager dance of lights, tying the knots of nightly movement across and around the net of lakes, in and out of the sound of breaking creeks. From very far above, it would be a net of nets, in pursuit, and spring causing them all.

"You think I'm stupid, don't ya?" yells Hilde.

"Oh no," I yell back. "I just wanted to know how you feel about feeling this way."

She slides in the mud but catches herself against a wet tree. My husband's gotten too far ahead with the lantern for us to see the path.

"God-damnit. God-damn mud. I thought you were trying to tell me I was crazy."

"Oh no, I don't think you are!"

Our world has not had any smell but chimney smoke since October and the first hard frost then which deadened the air. Actually what the first hard frost did was freeze up the last things of the year that smelled—mashed apples on the ground, rotting leaves, rotting marigolds, deer droppings, rain-soaked cabbages left in the garden. Hard frost has no smell, neither does snow. Though it's true that you can smell snow coming.

"I don't love him," Hilde continues, "but I sure like him. I couldn't feel this way about somebody I didn't like. And Everett knows how I feel. I think."

"Well, it's hard to avoid those feelings in this town," I say, a little grimly, feeling a little grim, trying to imply that one is taxed by these eternally rambunctious circumstances.

"That's for sure," she says.

She's gotten far behind me. "What?" I scream.

"I say, *that's* for sure."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And this seems to tie up the subject. It hasn't happened but it almost did. Maybe it will still happen. There's another dance next week for someone's birthday. We'll all go. We slosh on, after the bobbing light. Where is the creek mouth?

I think, sidestepping a bog, of the intricacy of language that rightly ought to form the details of this investigation into the facts and feelings of wanting Bart Stone. Bart Stone, currently unmarried again, is about thirty, has hundreds of white teeth, white as a wolf's, rubs musk oil in his hair for parties in emptied sheds, or garages, and after the first dance has stripped down to his thermal underwear shirt which, in cut and charm and cling, is curiously like Calvin Klein's cashmere sweat-shirt style sweaters. Bart Stone gets sweaty at dances because he dances with all four limbs and dances every dance. In between records, he goes outside and stands in his sweat in the snow, drinks whatever's at hand, someone else's hand, and yells several times at the sky. How far ought Hilde and I to go with this language? "I went almost all the way," intended to be a confessional delicacy, despite the wind and water noise, really sounds brutal if you think about it. Like a car wreck; totalled, "all the way." I want to start netting the subject with some details.

They can't have met in private because there's no place to go in private up here. Is necking in a dark, late, but public corner—the Town Meeting dance in the wooden Grange Hall—called an "affair"? We have only naked space here in the country, against which no one's car or truck is anonymous. And otherwise, only these sweaty public events. "Affairs" are urban. They take place in good clothes in small, tasteful, dim, empty bars on late afternoons after your last seminar, in a part of the city not your own; and affairs are largely composed of talk. Whatever it is that takes place with your head against a splintery upright, in a large damp crowd smelling of wet wool and felt packs (a crowd which sometimes includes your own children, as children also come to the town dances and dance), while wearing a thermal undershirt, while holding a can of warm beer stiffly, politely off to one side during the kiss, while overhearing bits of argument still hot about the further outrage perpetrated at today's Town Meeting over using revenue-sharing funds for filling spring road potholes or the unwarranted and totally unnecessary and undeserved raise in the dogcatcher's salary, whatever it is that happens during all this seems to need a word other than "affair." But then I'm not sure that Hilde would care that much right now about figuring this out, and exploration in this case seems finished, anyway. It's too noisy to talk. Nature makes too much noise for talk. At least we've understood each other.

"And I just want you to know, I don't care if you think I am crazy. I think I would've gone all the way if he'd've wanted to."

To this, I attempt to reply. "Wait!" I yell at the lantern, my husband, who's dancing ahead down the muddy path. He dances back.

"Wow, we live here! this is not a vacation! I went to work today!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's just what Everett and me were saying last night," says Hilde. "Ten minutes from your back door, and all this beauty."

The next afternoon, the children are home from school. It's the week off called "mud vacation," and truly, the school buses can't get down the country roads. Together, Hilde and I have seven children. They're all here at my house. She and I are sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea. We have propped the kitchen door open to let the sunshine in, sun shines on the melting snow and mud, little insects—snow fleas—play in the bar of light. Things outside hiss and trickle. Maple sap burbles on the wood stove, two canning kettles and one turkey roaster full. Everything is sticky and muddy. We've stopped cleaning anything for the duration: the tops of things, the floor, the kids.

The thawing mud is so deep that nobody can drive anywhere near to the house, so we can't hear cars. That's a loss, because hearing cars is always an event out here where we live, and sends the dog to one kitchen window and the children to another. There's no place for cars to be going but to this house. In winter the snow plow stops at the edge of our yard and turns back. So in winter, even the oil man coming is fun.

But now, with the mud, we can't hear the cars they have to park so far up the road, and so suddenly there's a great spawn of men on foot: Bart Stone, Marshall, P.D., Spider, Timmy Coffin, Freddie Ferber, and an unknown friend in a red hunting hat—filing largely into the afternoon through the spillway of the sunny door. They are muddy and tolerably drunk, in good spirits, each one carefully wrapped around a 16 oz. beer. They fill up the kitchen with an energy beyond their number and literal size. The dog leaps up and down. Hilde and I move our chairs together, offer tea. They don't want tea. "Tea! tea! oh yes Jeesus, tea!"

They have been out visiting all day, here and there, house to house. They are full of plans, and have come to engage whoever they found at home. It's Patriots' Day, but no one knows what that signifies except that none of them is at work. "I thought Patriots' Day was in November, man!" "No man, that's *War* Day in November."

First they talk about Freddie Ferber's troubles with Mrs. Marmelot, an elderly foreign lady from whom he's rented space for a lunch counter, the only one in the village, up front in the building in which she also lives, out back. She has lately retired from running the lunch counter and has given Freddie the lease. He is cook, manager, and the sole waiter and dishwasher. He's been running it for three weeks. It's housed in an old airy studio built and then abandoned by a taxidermist sometime in the 1930s.

"He rents her place, pays rent, he pays, man, to be her fuckin' manager. Do you know what he *makes* a week? Take-home? About one fuckin' quarter!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I can't put up with it much longer," says Freddie, shaking his head, with an early Beatles haircut, and looking down into his empty beer can.

"You know why she's so fuckin' crazy and tough? She was in the War, man, that's why, she was a fuckin' Chesso-sov-lakian go-rilla, man, that's why!" Much play on "go-rilla." Bart Stone imitates a go-rilla, scratching his ribs, showing his teeth, and falls off a stool laughing.

Freddie looks up, happily, inspired, forgets about his empty can. "That's what I'll tell the customers I got out back—a go-rilla! But ah, man, she's gonna ruin the breakfast crowd comin' in in her nightgown at 7:30 in the morning. 'Don't mind me boys, I'm just getting myself some coffee!' " Freddie mincingly imitates Mrs. Marmelot's Hungarian voice, her lordly girth, her lady-like demeanor. "You know what she says to me yesterday? She says 'I guess I'm going to have to give you your marching papers!' "

"Oh man *why* do you *take* it?"

A fight, Freddie now explains, has taken place with Mrs. Marmelot over the proper way to make a beef stew. Freddie is frying each piece "separate, with onions." But Mrs. Marmelot objects, wants him to add "lima beans and vinegar and all kinds of shit."

"Man, how can you let her do that, it's supposed to be your fuckin' place, she's got no fuckin' business bein' out there at all telling you what to do!"

"That's right! that's right!" says Freddie, now properly outraged. "When she ran it, would anybody with any brains even eat in there? You don't see me fixin' coffee in a frying pan, warming up that old crap from the morning, using two-day-old bread and five-day-old hamburg."

They've forgotten that Hilde and I are there. Much loud advice, head nodding, commiseration: "I'd kick her fat Russian ass right to Russia, Freddie, right back to Russia." "Let's hog-tie 'er and have a party in there tonight and then you can fuckin' quit Freddie." Netted with all this, talk of the coming Saturday night's birthday party, the beer supply for today, the adventures of today. "Let's liberate the bridge in Chesterville for Patriots' Day!" "Let's liberate Camp Bearspaw and have a party in that fuckin' big lodge of theirs." "Yeah man, let's do that, but what about them people up the head of their road in the chicken farm there though?" "Fuck it, man, we'll park way down and walk in." "Who can fuckin' walk, man?"

The stub of an already used joint passes back and forth, burning fingers and lips. The kids swarm through the room out into the mud and back in again. Some of the men are standing, some on stools and chairs, one in the open doorjamb, two on the edge of the lit woodstove. All of them talk at once. And sex, it runs like the major thread. "How about Faith Coffin, she's about what do you think eighty-five? Eighty-six now?" "That's don't make no difference, I can go for a hot old lady anytime." "How old's *she* now?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They point their beers at and tease Hilde about Patty, her nimble blond ten-year-old, whose face, blank and friendly as a school slate, pops into instant grin at this incomprehensible but adult attention. "*She's* old enough. When did you start Hilde? Thirteen? Fourteen? Fifteen?" "I was married when I was seventeen," says Hilde, primly. "Ah, man, twelve, then!" They wave their empty cans, pound the furniture, fall backwards with laughing. The kids have no idea what's going on—does anyone?—except that it's exciting, better than the oil man.

"When you gonna teach me t'dance?" asks Marshall, turning my way.

"You have to come to a party first, don't ya?"

"He's been on the wagon since New Year's Eve," says Hilde in a loud *sotto voce*. But I knew that. Marshall "goes overboard" everyone says. He's married to his high school sweetheart. He's avoiding the temptation of parties. His wife has already gone home several times to her mother, home being almost next door, and Marshall is not drinking, won't dance, and watches TV every night. Now he's so drunk his eyes roll, his eyelids are transparent lavender. He keeps rubbing his thick beard, forgetting that he has a lit cigarette in his hand.

One of them, Bart Stone, being a bachelor these days, has been invited out to supper. He asks to borrow the phone and calls the woman who invited him to tell her to expect fourteen. Then they all get up to leave. Marshall gives one rub to the top of my head while going through the door and groans with ritually acknowledged frustration. They're leaving because they've run out of beer and we don't have any. Of course no one says this. It wouldn't be polite. Hilde and I stand in the sunny doorway and watch them go and we talk a little of what we'll now fix for our respective suppers. And we know, though we do not say so to each other in the quiet, that they'll get back in the one crowded car and talk about us sexually. Not intricately, nor much, but with sighs and brief agreements. They won't use our Christian names: "she," "her," "the big one," "that little blond kid."

They'll talk about us, and some of our children, as "lays." The raucous, elaborate flirtations of the kitchen like mere spray on the larger creek of their deeper feelings, and those, they share only with each other, not with women. At least, not with women that they don't know. And not much with each other, and never in mixed company. Their deepest feelings may not be known.

They will squeeze and settle into the car, and in the lull of opening new beers, looking out the rear window and slowly backing out the quarter mile of still passable road to the tarred road, they'll talk. "A little to the left, a little to the left! Watch it!" Not hard to imagine their heavy, gloomy insinuations, the language of their serious formulas: "Yeah, I could sure go for that." "Oh yeah man, couldn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you though." The afternoon is over. It's time for everyone's supper at home. Hilde begins to gather up her children. "I'll have to hose you bunch down," she says.

Next day, seen singly in the village store, buying gas, bread, screws, stain, baby cereal, each man is subdued, circumspect, stiff, polite, perfunctory, eyes kept down, parsimonious, shy, Yankee. This is store decorum, and lore that I don't know yet controls it. It is as much ritualized, however, this decorum, and as much agreed-upon as are the protected ceremonies of abandon, to which we all move in and out the days as to an invisible music, a minuet, that calls the spring dance.

ALICE BLOOM

By Jean Starobinski——

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

Transparency and Obstruction
Translated by Arthur Goldhammer
With an Introduction by Robert J. Morrissey

Starobinski's most significant achievement and, arguably, the most comprehensive book ever written on Rousseau. "Remarkable. . . . such a wealth of reflections that we learn not only about Rousseau but about the distinctive qualities of the literature that was born with him."—Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir*

Paper $19.95 464 pages
Library cloth edition $60.00

MONTAIGNE IN MOTION

Translated by Arthur Goldhammer

"With Jean Starobinski, we have one of Montaigne's most remarkable and attentive readers."—Natalie Zemon Davis, *New York Review of Books*

Paper $14.95 360 pages
Library cloth edition $30.00

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS *5801 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF
New England

Light reading from the pens of scholars . . .

A Reader's Delight
NOEL PERRIN

"A book to savor and share with one's friends like a delicious secret."
—JAY PARINI

Few know that Walter de la Mare penned a children's story titled *The Three Royal Monkeys*, or that Henry Adams wrote *Democracy*, a political novel with a female protagonist. And who has read such masterpieces as *Islandia* by Austin Tappan Wright, *Essays in Idleness* by the 14th-century Japanese poet Kenko, or *Wild Animals I Have Known* by Ernest Thompson Seton? Noel Perrin thinks it's a shame serious reading is usually limited to recognized classics, even though there are many literary gems that, for some reason, have fallen from view. Here he presents brief essays on 40 works that he believes are unjustifiably neglected or forgotten. Each piece is written in the unpretentious, witty, and gently acerbic style familiar to Perrin fans. *$9.95 paper / $16.95 cloth*

A Continuing Education
SAMUEL F. PICKERING

The first collection of 12 humorous essays by a witty, insightful writer who uses the world of academia as a foil for praising what is genuine outside its cloistered walls. "Witty, wise, perceptive, and humane . . . not to be missed"—*Booklist. Now in paper, $8.95*

Disenchantments
An Anthology of Modern Fairy Tale Poetry
WOLFGANG MIEDER, *editor*

78 contemporary writers transform Grimms' fairy tales for a modern technological age. "Clever, charming, and perverse"—*The Boston Globe. Now in paper, $9.95*

University Press of New England, 17½ Lebanon St., Hanover, NH 03755

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

KERMIT MOYER

Ruth's Daughter

At the age of twelve—on the very day that she says she started bleeding for the first time—my mother was told by a gypsy fortuneteller to "beware of wheels." Nine years later, one particularly wet night in April, she and a young second lieutenant named Peter G. (for George) Hanson, the man destined to become my father, were on their honeymoon trip to Virginia Beach when he crashed the new car he was driving into the back of a stalled tractor-trailor, and my mother, who just previously had been sitting cozily beside him, smashed through the windshield and went flying out into the fog. She didn't almost die—she *did* die; her heart actually stopped beating. And then, after a black doctor named Reuben Benjamin started pounding on her chest while she still lay there in the road, it miraculously started up again.

My mother's name is Ruth. She has that same tenacity of spirit we associate with her namesake in the Old Testament, and when she tells you the part about her heart stopping, she'll slap the palm of her hand against her breast like someone trying to dislodge a fishbone from her throat. After the miraculous rescue, Ruth was sent to a hospital in New Rochelle, New York, where her nose was rebuilt from a piece of her own rib, her forehead and cheekbones were expertly reassembled, and her skin was sewn back together again so there was hardly any difference. Her face just took on the slightly asymmetrical cast that someone else's face has, someone familiar, when you happen to see it in a mirror.

A few months after Ruth was released from the hospital, my father got orders to Korea. He'd decided on a career in the Army while still in college, and he'd graduated from Lehigh the year before with a reserve commission, a degree in history, and a long, boyish face that people said made him look like Jimmy Stewart. By the time he left, Ruth was already pregnant with me, and by the time he got back I'd al-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ready started walking. Having me so quickly, I think, was simply Ruth's way of feeling whole again. She is a very purposeful woman; there is nothing in the lest dreamy or lackadaisical about her. In fact, throughout my childhood I used to think she never really slept at all. She has a scar that crooks across her forehead like a finger. With makeup on it's hardly noticeable, but when she's sleeping it keeps one eyelid held slightly open. If the scar was one result of her accident, I was just as surely another. Ruth used to tell me she'd prayed for a daughter and gotten an angel instead, and I think my first stirrings must have felt to her like redemption. I know she had my name picked out from the very first, like something tucked away in a drawer just waiting for the right occasion: Rebecca Rachel—after her own mother and her mother's mother, both long since dead.

At the age of seventeen, just two weeks before my high school graduation, I discovered that I was pregnant myself—in my own case, quite unexpectedly. The growing certainty became absolute fact one dark and drizzly Friday morning in a fluorescent-lighted doctor's office in Aiken, South Carolina. My father had been transferred to Fort Gordon, which is in Georgia, and we'd been living in Augusta for about three years. By that time, we'd already lived all over the world, as I liked to say—Germany, Okinawa, Texas. I considered myself quite the world traveler. Compared to Dallas, where I'd gone to junior high, Augusta seemed like the very edge of nowhere; I couldn't wait for college to come along and carry me away. Augusta is also right on the Savannah River—all you have to do is cross over and you're in another state, which is exactly what I did as soon as I decided I had to see a doctor.

Things always seemed a little looser somehow in South Carolina, probably because you only had to be eighteen to buy beer over there. In my high school, crossing the river was associated with fake IDs and with generally doing things you weren't supposed to. In fact, I was parked over there, way back on a dead-end little two-rut trail in the woods, the night I'm sure the baby was conceived. The father was a sweet, romantic local boy named Robby Dodd Gleason. He had a cowlick at his forehead, and he wrote me poems as well as playing on the high school football team. We'd been going steady right through our senior year, but it was only the second time

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we'd actually gone all the way. We were parked in our special place over in the scrub pines across the river and Robby Dodd was touching me the way he always did, like he couldn't quite believe I was real. He'd start saying my name over and over again and I wouldn't be able to get enough of the way it sounded when he said it.

I liked Robby Dodd a lot, but I knew I wasn't in love. Or rather I thought, if this is love, then it isn't anything I can't handle. It was fun, but I expected to be in love a lot more times before I ever got married—*if* I ever got married, which was doubtful. I thought that great actresses (or great writers—I hadn't yet decided which I was) were better off not married. My mother had been brought back from the dead, literally resurrected, so that I might be born, and I assumed I'd probably just take a succession of lovers while I followed the rising star of my own unique fulfillment. But I was grateful to Robby Dodd. I didn't want to have to leave high school still a virgin, and I wanted to extend my emotional range as well. Most of all, I wanted to know that terrible, significant things were happening to me. Only by going through the fire, I believed, could my genius be tempered and made durable. As for being hurt, I'd decided I was exempt: Ruth had already paid my way.

When I left the doctor's office in Aiken, I was terrified, but somehow it was exhilarating too, like the charge of adrenalin you might feel as the curtain begins to rise on the great drama of your life. That afternoon when I got home from school, Ruth was doing something at the kitchen sink, coring an apple maybe or scrubbing the dirt off an Idaho potato. After raining all morning, the sun had unexpectedly come out in full force and it was pouring in through the window in front of her, spangling the tiny motes of dust in the air so that she seemed to be standing in a shower of miniaturized, nearly invisible confetti.

"Why's it so dusty in here?" I said.

"I don't think it's so much the dust this time of year as the pollen," Ruth said. She turned toward the window over the sink and pointed with an elbow. "Mostly from that locust and those two maples over there. It gets in the air and that's that, brother, there's not a thing you can do about it."

We looked out the window for a second, and then I said,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Why don't you sit yourself down and let me trim off your split ends? You've been looking a little frazzled around the edges lately. I'll even throw in a scalp massage, the whole deluxe treatment."

Ruth loved to have her hair worked on. She'd gone to beauty school and worked as a beautician for nearly two years before the accident. It must have been a perfect career for Ruth, ideally suited not only to her own physical vanity but also to her love of advising other people. Ruth herself has the kind of fine-textured yet naturally oily skin that never wrinkles, and her thick, abundant hair is the burnt-gold color of the sun in certain old Art Nouveau posters I've seen. I much prefer her intense, dramatic coloring to my own pallidness. I look more like my father: light-brown hair and eyes that are a sort of washed-out blue with little spikes of dark gray around the pupils. Ruth's eyes are as sea green as the eyes of a calico cat.

We stood at the kitchen sink while I washed Ruth's hair, and when I was through, she sat down at the kitchen table with a towel around her shoulders. I got behind her so I could comb out her hair.

"I don't know how to tell you this," I said.

"What?" She started to turn around to look at me, but I held her head.

"Just sit still and let me comb," I told her. I held the top of her head with one hand and tugged the metal teeth through her hair with the other, pulling carefully when I came to a snarl and spattering water each time I completed a stroke.

"I went to a doctor this morning over in Aiken—"

She started to turn her head again but I had a knot of hair caught in the comb and she couldn't turn very far. "Ow—that hurts," she said.

"Well, just hold still and wait a minute—"

"What do you mean you went to a doctor? What kind of a doctor? What's the matter?"

"An o-b-g-y-n," I said, spelling out the letters as if there were a child nearby who shouldn't hear what I was saying.

"Dear God in heaven—don't tell me."

She'd stopped trying to turn around now. She was sitting still. I tugged the comb through her hair and she tilted her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

head slightly forward against the tension of my pulling. I had expected my news to weaken her somehow—I think I even imagined her breaking into tears and reaching out blindly for something to hold on to. But nothing like that happened. Instead, she seemed, just sitting there, to take on weight, as if *she* were the one who was pregnant, not me.

"Well, we can't tell your father," she said. "At least not right away. I knew there was something—just as soon as you walked in the door, I knew it like a premonition. It was Robby Dodd, wasn't it?"

"Mother, Robby Dodd and I—"

"How far along are you?"

"About, I don't know, a little over two months, I guess. It's from a time I think back in April. We went to see *Dr. Zhivago*."

"You went to see *Dr. Zhivago*," Ruth shook her head back and forth. "Becky, Becky, Becky," she said. "Dear God in heaven, I can't believe it. We'll just have to figure out what to do, that's all." She sat still for a minute, as if she were listening to something; then she said, "I know what—I'll call Reuben Benjamin in Philadelphia, maybe he'll know the name of someone." Doctor Benjamin was in his seventies now; although he and Ruth had only seen each other a couple of times since the accident, they still exchanged Christmas cards every year.

"What do you mean the *name* of someone?"

"Don't worry," she said. "This thing doesn't have to ruin your life. Just let me think about it. It's not the end of the world, we'll figure something out." She ran her fingers through her damp hair. "Don't let me get too dry or you won't be able to see the split ends."

I went back to work and neither of us said anything for a while—there was just the whishing sound of the comb and then the clicking of the scissors, like someone going tut-tut-tut-tut. Gradually, some hold I'd had on myself all day began to let go, and pretty soon I was crying, the tears sliding quietly down my cheeks as I trimmed Ruth's hair. I wasn't ready to look her in the eyes yet, and I didn't want her to try to comfort me either, I felt too weak for that, so I tried to keep my breath from catching and just went on cutting. I didn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

want to have a baby any more than Ruth wanted me to, and I was so relieved she'd taken over the whole problem of what to do I felt like I might float away. Now, I thought, I'll just be going along for the ride—Ruth will see to whatever has to be done, and I'll just be a sort of passenger.

By the time we made the trip to Philadelphia, it was the last day of June, nearly three weeks later. As far as my father knew, Ruth and I were just traveling around looking at colleges. Which in fact we were—what had begun as a deception turned into part of our mission and we must have visited half a dozen campuses by the time we got to Philadelphia. But if my father was pleased by our trip, Robby Dodd was thrown into despair. He didn't know about my being pregnant either (I still didn't show), but he believed that if I really loved him I'd be content to stay in Augusta and go to college there; otherwise, he said, our love was doomed. For my own part, I liked nothing better than the role of star-crossed lover, and I spent the early morning hours after our senior prom kissing the tears off Robby Dodd's face and promising that I'd go on loving him no matter what. A little while later, as we were crossing the Savannah River on our way back home, the sun came up, streaking the horizon an exquisite gold, and I reached out and traced my initials in the mist our breathing had made on the inside of the car window.

What happened was that the day after I told her, Ruth called Reuben Benjamin. He was long retired by then but, as predicted, he'd come through with the name of someone. Ruth had taken it down on a section of the perforated note paper she kept on a roll by the telephone, and as we were driving across the Ben Franklin Bridge into downtown Philadelphia she took it out of her bra and unfolded it for the third time that morning.

"Doctor Raymond Patterson," she said, offering up the syllables once again for our consideration. When I didn't respond, she glanced back at the creased paper in her hand and read the address. For some reason, we both found the sound of "Twenty-Two Eighty Greenwood Street" reassuring.

Ruth was driving and I was sitting next to her navigating. "When we get over the bridge just keep going straight," I said. "Then we turn south on Twenty-Second."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I've always thought I'd like to live in Philadelphia someday," Ruth said. "The City of Brotherly Love they call it—I never understood why that was—"

"William Penn was a Quaker," I explained. "Quakers are pacifists—like Gary Cooper in *Friendly Persuasion*." That and *Gone with the Wind* were Ruth's all-time favorite movies.

"Isn't it funny I never knew that?" she said. "I just always thought it sounded so friendly." She glanced over at me. "How are you feeling? Why don't you have another soda cracker?" She felt around on the seat between us for the waxed-paper package of saltines she'd prescribed for my nausea.

"I'm fine, just watch where you're going," I said. "God, look at this place. I can't believe how run-down everything looks."

"A lot of very wealthy people live in Philadelphia," Ruth told me. "Didn't you ever hear of the Main Line? Grace Kelly's family is from Philadelphia."

"I think we're headed for a slightly different neighborhood," I said.

The further into the city we drove the more depressed I was getting. Everything looked dirty and dilapidated. Rows of adjoining houses faced flush on the street with nothing but a raised step or two between the door and the sidewalk. All the streets seemed to be named after trees, but what few trees there were looked scrawny and wilted. It was only a little after ten in the morning, but the humidity was already at work like an extra force of gravity, compressing the heat until it actually seemed to liquify over the hoods of the cars parked along Greenwood Street. A few people were out walking, but there wasn't another white face in sight.

"There it is," Ruth said. "That must be it there where the shingle is. Twenty-Two Eighty."

"What time is it? We still have to park," I said.

"Don't worry, we've got plenty of time. Do you feel okay?"

"I just want this to be over with," I said.

"Pretend you're someone else," Ruth said. "That's what I do. When it's something bad, I just pretend it's happening to someone else. I put myself into a kind of trance. Nothing can touch you if you don't let it. If you have to, Becky, you can turn yourself into steel."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm trying," I said. "I just hope it doesn't hurt—"

"At some point *everything* hurts," Ruth said.

"Gee, thanks. That cheers me right up," I said. And in fact it did: it felt like the truth, and the worse it was the more satisfaction there was somehow in facing it.

"There is nothing free in this life," Ruth told me. Then she said, "I think I see a space." She pulled a quick U-turn at the next intersection, drove back a block and parked in front of a Laundromat with a boarded-up window and the front door propped open. A young black woman was standing in the doorway smoking a cigarette. Next to her was a sign that said COIN-O-MATIC and behind her were the revolving blades of an electric ceiling fan. I could feel the woman's eyes on us while we rolled up the windows and locked the car. When we got out, I was afraid Ruth might say something loud enough for her to hear. All I wanted was to be invisible. I remembered Ruth's trick: this isn't really me, I thought, this isn't really me. I kept my eyes on the ground and simply followed my mother. I was wearing sandals and I watched the delicate way the thongs crisscrossed over my insteps. Watching my feet made me feel detached. I admired the high curve of the arches, the round little toes. They really might have belonged to someone else.

We turned in at a house with entrance stairs and a narrow porch. There was a brass nameplate, but before I could read it the door swung open and out stepped a white man in a blue uniform. He wore a peaked cap with a badge. It was only the mailman, but in the instant before I saw his leather pouch, I thought it was the police, and the full cup of my steady low-grade nausea suddenly started to tip.

"Oh," I said. I turned to one side, leaned over, and let it spill. Ruth handed me a Kleenex and I stood there wiping at my mouth, keeping still while I waited for the nausea to pass.

"Are you ladies all right?" the mailman asked. "Do you need a hand?"

"Isn't that kind of you," Ruth said. "I'm sure we'll be fine. We're just on our way to see the doctor."

"She'll feel better out of the sun," the mailman said. As he went past us, his fat pouch brushed against my bare arm.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Let's just get inside, please," I said to Ruth. "I've got to sit down."

She pushed open the door for me and we walked out of the bright light into semi-darkness. A fan was humming. A slight breeze from it lifted the hair away from my neck.

"Why don't you sit right down," Ruth said. "I'll let the nurse know we're here. I think we're a few minutes early." Her voice was loud in the room's quiet dimness.

Ruth walked over to the reception window, and I sank into an easy chair with crocheted doilies on the arms. There were some other people in the room, but I didn't want to look at them. On the table beside me, next to a lamp with an ornamental base and a fringed shade, was a pile of magazines. I pulled an old *Life* off the top and started leafing through it. Except for the sliding glass panels in the opposite wall, the room wasn't anything like a doctor's office. It reminded me of my father's aunt's house in Wilmington, Delaware. The shades were drawn against the heat, so the light had an antique, submerged quality, like a sepia photograph. In off-hours this was obviously somebody's living room. An old upright piano with stacks of sheet music piled across the top stood against the wall next to the electric fan. The room smelled not of antiseptic but of cooking and pipe smoke and old paper. It was a musty, comforting smell.

"My daughter has an appointment," I heard Ruth say. "But I guess we're probably a little early—"

"Name?"

Across from me, sitting on a scroll-armed sofa with three scalloped doilies fastened to its back, was a pretty young black woman and a little boy of about three or four. She was fanning herself with a *National Geographic* and he was playing a game—sliding slowly off the sofa and then boosting himself back up, sliding slowly off again. When I raised my eyes to watch, he gave me a big delighted grin. He was crouched on the floor, having just completed a descent.

"Jesse, stop that and sit still," the woman said. "Get back up here." She slapped the cushion beside her.

A dapper little man with a mustache was sitting in the armchair next to the piano. He had on a suit and tie, but he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looked perfectly cool nonetheless. "Is your name Jesse?" he said to the boy. "What do you know about that? My name's James. Maybe you and me ought to team up." He cocked his finger at the boy and laughed. The woman didn't even give him a glance.

"Rebecca Hanson," I heard Ruth say. "I'm her mother. Doctor Benjamin referred us. I made the appointment myself not three weeks ago. It must be there."

Every time I turned a page of the *Life* magazine, the breeze from the fan would make it quiver slightly in my fingers. I tried to ignore the conversation at the reception window by focusing on an advertisement for a kidney-shaped swimming pool with turquoise-colored water. Esther Williams was smiling at me from the pool's blue-and-white tiled edge. She had evidently just surfaced after making one of her perfect dives. Water was still clinging in droplets to her bathing cap.

"We'll just wait until he can spare us a minute then," I heard Ruth say. When I looked up again, she was taking a seat next to the pretty black woman on the sofa. She looked at me and shrugged. I nodded and immediately went back to my magazine before she could try to explain anything in front of these other people. A few minutes passed without anyone speaking, then the nurse came out of her office and said, "Mrs. Hanson, will you and your daughter step this way please?"

We followed her down the hallway to a small room where a heavy-set black man was sitting behind a desk. He stood up, shook our hands, and waved at a couple of chairs. "Mrs. Hanson, Miss Hanson," he said. "Please sit down. I'm sorry, but there seems to be some misunderstanding. You say you talked with me on the telephone, but I have no recollection of such a call." His voice was a rich baritone, like an actor's, and there was a slight Caribbean lilt to it.

Ruth sat forward in her chair and while she repeated my story I could imagine the look on her face—eyes narrowed, her mouth tightened, the slight groove of a scar shining through the makeup over her left eyebrow. When she finished, the doctor sat back in his chair and clasped his hands in front of him. He was wearing a brown vest and a green bow tie. Nodding his head, he looked speculatively at my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mother; then he turned his eyes on me. I was staring at the back of a double picture frame that stood on his desk. Probably photographs of his wife and children, maybe pictures of Barbados or Guadeloupe. I felt not only inadequate to my role but completely subsumed by it—as if, before, I'd been opaque, and now I'd become as transparent as a piece of glass. I realized it wasn't invisibility I wanted after all—it was just the reverse.

When I didn't meet his eyes, the doctor turned back and faced my mother. His hair was cut very close to his head and the thin line of a part had been shaved high on one side. "Excuse me, but I think I see the problem," he said. "I am not Doctor Patterson. I am Doctor Bonnard. Doctor Patterson's office is across the street. You have come to the wrong doctor."

"But I told the nurse Doctor Patterson," my mother said. "I'm sure I did. If this is some kind of joke, it better not be, because it's not very funny—"

Doctor Bonnard sat with his elbows on the armrests of his swivel chair, his hands still clasped in front of him like a child playing This Is the Church, This Is the Steeple. He opened his fingers. "I am afraid there is no joke here," he said.

The right doctor turned out to be at Twenty-Two Eighty-*Three* Greenwood Street. We left Dr. Bonnard's office like two people who have come to the party on the wrong night. We walked back through the breezy semi-darkness of the waiting room and out once more into the oppressive glare of the street. I knew we'd be late now for sure. I didn't wear a watch, but according to Ruth's it was almost eleven o'clock. Of course, Ruth's watch was only ever approximate—she always set it fast or slow on purpose and then could never remember which or by exactly how much.

I was furious. "I can't believe this is actually happening," I hissed when we were out on the sidewalk. "This is absolutely unbelievable. How could you take me to the wrong doctor? How can that happen? I'm *relying* on you, Mother, you're supposed to be *helping* me—"

Before I could say anything else, Ruth grabbed the upper part of my arm and shook it once. She looked at me hard

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and said, "I am doing the best I can. I am sorry if what happened back there embarrassed you, but that is the least of it. Do you understand? That is nothing. There are more important things to think about right now. Those people don't know anything about us—or us about them. Let it go, Becky, forget about it, it just doesn't matter." She let go of my arm and brushed some loose hair away from my eyes.

I didn't apologize, but she'd made me feel better. I wanted her to be right, I wanted it not to matter, so finally I took her hand and we walked across to Twenty-Two Eighty-Three, which also had a nameplate on the door. R. PATTERSON, M.D., it said, and underneath, OBSTETRICS AND GYNECOLOGY. Since this place also looked more like somebody's home than a doctor's office, Ruth rapped on the door and we waited a minute to see if anyone would answer. The top half of the door was made of glass—set in square little panes, I remember, like in the snow-drifted windows on Christmas cards—but there was a pleated lace curtain behind it and you couldn't see in. Ruth was about to turn the knob when the door suddenly swung open, and we found ourselves facing a little old black woman who was so hunched over and wizened she hardly looked real—she was like someone in a fairy tale. She had a wooden cane that looked like a gnarled root and, despite the heat, a shawl over her shoulders and a kerchief around her head.

"We're here to see Doctor Patterson," my mother said.

The old woman didn't say a word. Instead, she turned away from the door and motioned with her cane for us to follow. We entered a hallway with a staircase at the end and, to one side, a parlor that might have been a replica of the waiting room we'd just left. The shades were drawn here too, but in the filtered, brownish light, I had an impression of old armchairs and hassocks, framed photographs on a table, a curved sofa with antimacassars on the back. I half expected to see another little Jesse grinning up at me from the floor. The old woman stepped into the room's arched doorway and pulled on a tasselled cord that hung down by the jamb. Up on the wall above her was a little brass bell. She rang it three times; then she turned back to us, stamped her cane on the floor, and pointed with it toward the staircase at the end of the hall.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Thank you," my mother said. "Thank you very much."

The old woman made no sign of having heard. She was hobbling back into the parlor. A lamp with an orange shade was turned on next to a rocking chair, and on the table a Bible lay open under a large round magnifying glass. The pages were all tipped with red, and the soft black covers were crimped up around the book's edges.

We'd just started toward the stairs when we heard footsteps coming down. The first we saw of Dr. Patterson was his shoes—they were shiny black bedroom slippers, pointed at the toe—followed by black trousers and a patterned green tunic with three-quarter sleeves. When his face came into view, it had a wide smile and his teeth shone white inside the dark circle of his mustache and goatee. His hair was cut in a modified Afro (the first I'd ever seen), and it gave him a disconcerting electrified look. He exuded the confident energy of a very handsome man—it was like a magnetic tug that made you immediately pull back and go on the alert.

"Mrs. Hanson?" he said. "It had better be you because I didn't make any other appointments today. And you must be Rebecca. Reuben sends his regards. I'm Ray Patterson. Come on up, I keep my office right upstairs here. I'm afraid you may have had some trouble finding me." He talked rapidly and unself-consciously, without any of the usual nervous formality of people meeting for the first time.

"I'm sorry we're late," my mother said. "But somehow we got the wrong address and ended up at the doctor across the street. He just sat there and let me tell him everything—I hope it won't make any trouble—"

"Doctor Bonnard? That sanctimonious old faker? Believe me, you didn't tell him anything he doesn't already know, one way or another." He ushered us into a small room that looked like the study in a Sherlock Holmes movie. There were glass-fronted bookcases, a wing chair behind a Victorian desk, worn Oriental rugs and burgundy-colored drapes. It was much cooler in here. I could hear the hum of an air-conditioner and smell the eucalyptus scent of what I thought was room deodorant until I noticed some kind of stick smoking in a thin vase and realized it must be incense.

"Brother Bonnard is not only a doctor, he is also a self-appointed minister of the Lord. But Brother Bonnard's own

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

medical conduct is not exactly what you would call beyond reproach. I guess you could say he writes a few more prescriptions than he absolutely should. Other things too, things he might prefer his congregation didn't know and which it happens I *do* know. So he and I are still at deuce. Plus which, he ain't 'bout to go messin' with no white folks, you dig—" Dr. Patterson leaned back and laughed. He was sitting on a corner of the desk with one of his slippered feet dangling, and when he laughed he opened his mouth and tilted his head back so that from where I was sitting I had a strange glimpse of his throat and the gold fillings in his upper teeth.

I looked over at Ruth and saw that she was pretending to laugh along with him. With a shock I realized that from this point on she didn't know any more about what to expect than I did.

Almost as if he'd been reading my mind, Dr. Patterson looked at each of us in turn and said, "Just so you don't feel any more up in the air about what's going on than you have to, let me explain exactly what I'm going to do. At this stage of pregnancy, the fetus is too developed for suctioning and scraping." He looked at me and smiled as if this were very good news indeed. "There'll be no need for any scraping at all. Instead, we will simply induce a miscarriage, and the body will expel the fetus *naturally*. But before that occurs, you have got to be properly dilated, and that means a dilator and an iodine pack—just wads of cotton gauze, not much worse than a Tampax—except for a little cramping you'll hardly feel a thing. The packing will stay in overnight, and then tomorrow morning I'll do the injection. After that you'll go through a kind of false labor to expel the fetus. We could do the whole thing here, but I'd prefer not to because it will take some time. Instead, I've made arrangements with a very reliable woman who is also a trained practical nurse. You'll stay at her house tonight; then tomorrow morning I'll come by and give you the injection. It won't be possible for me to be present throughout the expulsion process itself, but she will. Her name is Evangeline Williams. She works the night shift at Holy Redeemer, so she's at home right now, and she's expecting both of you. I'll give you directions and you can drive over there just as soon as we're finished here. I believe we've already discussed the financial arrangements. As a sign of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

good faith, I'll take half the money now, in cash, and then you can give me the balance tomorrow morning when I perform the injection. How does that sound?" His eyes came to rest on my mother.

Ruth had been nodding her head as he talked, and now she looked over at me. "Does that sound all right to you?"

"I didn't realize we'd have to stay overnight," I said. "Why can't we just go to a motel and come back in the morning?"

"You could probably do that, of course," Dr. Patterson said. "But I'd prefer you to be with some qualified person like Mrs. Williams. In any case, you can't stay here after the injection, and at that point it may be difficult, you know, to travel. I'd like you to be someplace where you won't have to move. I think we're very fortunate that Mrs. Williams is available. Frankly, I'm not at all sure I'd have decided to help you otherwise—"

So that was that. We agreed all around, and then Ruth opened her pocketbook. She took some bills from an envelope and counted out five of them, placing each one on the desk in front of Dr. Patterson as if she were dealing out a poker hand. He shuffled them into a neat stack and folded it exactly in half before slipping it into his pocket. Then he turned to me and smiled and again I felt all the force of his attention. It made me feel clumsy and shy, like a girl on the first date she really cares about. I wanted very much for him to take charge of things, but I also resented his power—it was in such contrast to my own awkwardness and dependence. It diminished me, and there was a part of me that hated him for it. But even that part felt pleasantly stirred, as if a secret pulse, normally at rest, had suddenly started to beat.

Before getting down to business, he gave Ruth a copy of the morning paper and told her to make herself at home. Then he took me into another room so he could examine me and put in the iodine pack. The examination and the rest of it seemed unreal: sitting with my breasts exposed while a strange black man with electrified hair listened to my heart through a stethoscope, lying on the table under a white drape with my legs pulled back and my feet in the metal stirrups while his fingers pumped up the nausea inside of me like a balloon.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm going to be sick," I said, trying to sit up and lean over.
"That's cool," he said. "Just do whatever you have to."
I retched but nothing came up and then the wave passed.
"How much more?" I asked.
"Almost done. Just lean back and count to ten real slow."
I did it, closed my eyes and counted, and a long time seemed to go by. It felt like the lower part of my body was a lump of clay, and I was counting the strokes it would take to mold the clay into my own natural shape. Then, after a while, I opened my eyes and Dr. Patterson's back was to me. He was taking off his rubber gloves, running water in the sink—talking to me, but I was missing what he said. The running water made it hard to hear. There was something else too—a humming sound, like someone singing. I thought it was coming from me for a second until I realized it was only the air-conditioner in the window.

By the time we finally found Evangeline Williams' house, it was late afternoon. We'd gotten lost twice by then and also stopped for lunch at one of those railroad-car diners with chrome stools at a counter. I felt like I was carrying a pillow between my legs, but I'd regained my appetite soon after leaving Dr. Patterson's office, and I remember I ate a tuna-melt on toast and, defiantly, a bowl of tomato soup—more than I'd eaten at one sitting in a couple of days. It really felt in some ways like we'd gotten through the worst, and I guess I was hungry with relief. But by the time we reached our destination, I was more closed-down and irritable than ever. Sweat was rolling down my sides and I was wondering if I might not have a fever. At one point, while I was holding the back of my hand against my forehead to see if it felt hot, I realized I must look exactly like the besieged heroine in some old-fashioned melodrama, but it didn't even make me smile.

The address we were looking for was on a narrow street lined with parked cars, one of them up on blocks with the rusted wheel drums showing. Three boys wearing knit caps but no shirts were walking down the sidewalk. I heard one of them say, "I ain't lyin', Jack, that mutha blew-*e-e-e*!—I mean *sky*-high!" and they all laughed. The house we wanted had a small front yard with a chain-link fence, and Ruth opened the gate and latched it behind us as gingerly as if she'd come

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to sell something. When she rang the doorbell, I said, "Avon calling," but before Ruth could say anything back, a little girl opened the door. "Why, hello, there," Ruth said. "Is this the Williams residence?"

The girl must have been about four or five. Her hair was tied in braids with little yellow and red ribbons all over her head, and she was wearing a loose, sleeveless dress. She had a round face with great, vivid eyes.

"Yes, ma'am," she said. Then she turned and called, "Mama, it's the ladies." She stood aside for us to come in, gestured toward the living room, and with a perfectly deadpan expression said, "Mama say if I be good I can have sparklers for the Fourth of July. You can watch me if you want to."

"That sounds real nice," I said. "I'd like that."

"My name is Sarah Williams," she said. "Pretty soon I be old enough to ride on the schoolbus. My birthday is August the third." Saying this she suddenly seemed to go shy. She turned to one side and started pulling at a loose thread at the hem of her dress.

There was a window fan in the living room, but it didn't seem to do much good—it was perceptibly hotter in here than outside. What with the heat and everything else, I felt like I might faint—that's what I'd do if I were a real Southern belle, I remember thinking—but instead I tried to brace myself against the back of a chair. I didn't want to chance sitting down until I'd been to the bathroom.

"Sarah, look at you standing there like a bump on a log," someone said in a soft, fluty voice—not scolding but not teasing either. "Can't you tell our guests to have a seat?"

I turned to see a tall, very dark-skinned woman coming down the carpeted stairs. She was wearing a long, flowing caftan and she had her hair in a turban knotted at the back. Her eyes were wide-set and tilted, and her posture as she came down the stairs seemed almost absurdly erect—like a soldier, I thought, or like a child playing grown-up.

"I'm Evangeline Williams," she said. "You all must be weary to the bone. Please sit down. I'm afraid you've caught us in the middle of one of our Philadelphia heat waves. Can I fix you a glass of iced tea?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "Please. But first can I use your bathroom?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Top of the stairs," she said. "Can you manage all right?"

"I think so."

"Good. If you have a dizzy spell or need to lie down all of a sudden, your room's right across the hall."

"Thanks," I said. "I do feel a little peculiar."

At that point apparently I went as white as a sheet and then, like a piece of laundry sliding off a clothesline, I just sort of folded down onto the floor.

When I opened my eyes it was almost dark. I was stretched out on a sofa, and for a certain period of time I lay there without knowing exactly where I was or why. It was a pleasant, floating sensation and I didn't want to lose it. I seemed to be completely alone. The only noise was the soft whirring of a fan. I lay very still and watched the way everything white in the room gradually sponged up all the light, until finally the air grew mottled with darkness and there was less light in a window than in the back of a butterfly chair. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again a lamp was turned on and I was looking up into the shining eyes of the little black girl with ribbons in her hair.

"Hello, Sarah," I said. "I guess I've been asleep. What time is it?"

She dropped her eyes and shrugged.

"Where is everybody?"

She raised her eyes back to mine. She was a very solemn, no-nonsense sort of little girl who seemed to be aware of carrying some grave responsibility. When she pointed upstairs, I was reminded of the ancient woman who'd answered Dr. Patterson's door.

"Cat got your tongue?" I teased.

She stuck it out so I could see for myself, not as a joke but as a simple demonstration of fact. Then she put a finger to her lips and I understood that Ruth must be upstairs taking a nap.

"Did your mother already go to work?" I whispered.

Sarah nodded her head and whispered back, "Mama say when you all wake up we can have some pea soup."

"Are you awful hungry?"

She dropped her eyes, put her hands behind her back, and started twisting from side to side so her dress swirled back and forth at her knees.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sitting up I discovered that I felt much better. For the time being anyway, there was no nausea. Also, the fever seemed to have left me cool and strangely clear-sighted. Everything I looked at, whether close-up or far away, had the same sharp-edged definition—like the clarity of objects in a surrealist painting or the exaggerated focus of certain photographs. I could see the crosshatching in a window screen across the room, each interstice geometrically precise, and the tiny coils of hair at Sarah's temples were each as contoured and three-dimensional as a shiny piece of wire.

"Don't worry, we'll eat in just a minute," I told Sarah. Then I got off the sofa and went upstairs to look for Ruth.

I found her in a bedroom at the top of the stairs. In the wedge of light from the hall, I could see her lying on her back in her half-slip and brassiere. With her arms outstretched and her legs parted, she looked like a long-distance swimmer taking a break. I could see the white of her eye in a little crescent where the left eyelid failed to go all the way closed. Her dress was folded neatly at the foot of the bed, and she was lightly snoring. I was thinking I hated to wake her up when the doorbell suddenly started ringing and her eyes snapped all the way open. She looked at me vaguely for a second and then, when the doorbell rang again, seemed to realize all at once that it wasn't me who'd wakened her.

"I wonder who that is," I said.

"Wait." she stood up, pulled on her dress and turned around for me to zip her up. "You wait here," she said. "Let me handle this. Mrs. Williams said not to let anyone in—especially not Doctor Patterson. She said not to worry a bit—he's a fine doctor, one of the best. But you know how these people are. She said he likes to gamble sometimes and if he's been drinking and losing he might come looking for the other half of his money—"

"Oh, God," I said. I sat down on the edge of the bed. It had a white chenille coverlet. From this angle the hall light was in my eyes and I felt like I might be sick again. "I'm going to wait in the bathroom," I said. "This kind of stuff really makes me nauseous—I just have to forget it's happening."

"Nothing *is* going to happen, Becky. Just keep your mind on that."

Ruth started down the stairs and I went across the hall into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the bathroom. I closed the door and turned on the water so I wouldn't have to hear anything else. Then I held my hair back with one hand and leaned over the toilet. I stared down at the little pool of water in the bowl and waited to see if I was going to be sick. Water was splashing in the sink, a fine spray occasionally tickling the side of my face, and I stood there and thought of the absolute strangeness—in all the infinity of time and space—of my being right in that precise spot at that particular moment. There was a rust stain at the bottom of the toilet bowl, down where it tunnelled into the plumbing, and I remember thinking: now this stain will be something I'll remember, carry with me wherever I go, forever. I was here because I'd been with Robby Dodd Gleason in the back seat of his father's car, but the simple connection between that moment and this one seemed unfathomable as if the floor had just dropped out from under me. It wasn't so much something I thought as something I felt, a physical sensation, like light or sound—which isn't to say that I felt suddenly enlightened or informed, because I didn't. Just the opposite: I felt a sense of unknowing that was like some kind of vertigo. It made me reach down and hang on to the cool enamel edge of the bowl. And then it all came up—everything I'd eaten at the diner so defiantly. Afterwards, I leaned over the sink and washed my face, rinsing my mouth until the acid taste was gone. I stood up and was looking at myself in the mirror when I heard Ruth outside the door.

"Becky? Are you all right? Let me in, I'll hold your forehead for you." She rattled the doorknob.

"It's open," I said.

That's me, I was thinking, looking in the mirror. But the idea seemed preposterous, like a plan to build a bridge across the ocean. What impressed me about the person in the mirror was that she was perfectly opaque. I knew I was supposed to be somewhere behind that surface, but the idea was impossible. To prove it, I reached out and pulled the mirror open. I looked into the medicine cabinet at shelves of plastic vials with typed prescription labels, an aspirin bottle with a red cap next to a blue jar of Noxema, adhesive tape on a metal spool and two rolls of cotton gauze, shiny eyebrow tweezers, manicure scissors and a man's shaving brush, its bristles shading from wheat-color down to jet black.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The door's locked, it won't open," Ruth said, still rattling the knob.

I reached over and flushed the toilet. "Sorry—I didn't realize it was locked." I turned the button on the knob from vertical to horizontal and opened the door.

"Here I am," I said. "Everything's all right."

"Thank goodness. I thought you might be having some kind of reaction or something—"

"No," I said. "Nothing like that. Just the usual."

"Listen to this, Becky, you'll never believe it. That was none other than Doctor Patterson, but he wasn't drunk—he was every inch the gentleman. He just came by to check in on us and—Becky, I honestly think he wanted me to go out on the town with him—you know, like on a date. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Can you imagine?"

Without really feeling anything, I discovered that tears were streaming down my cheeks, and then I was sobbing.

"Becky?" Ruth said. "What is it, honey? What's the matter?"

All I could do was shake my head. I didn't know what the matter was, I didn't know anything at all. I turned away from Ruth and started to reach across the sink for a Kleenex to wipe my eyes, but then I realized I'd have to go in front of the mirror again so I used the backs of my fingers instead.

Ruth put her arms around me and tucked my head into her shoulder. "There, there," she said, patting my back and rocking me gently, "there, there."

Doctor Patterson came back at about ten-thirty the next morning. He showed up wearing cut-off jeans and a navy-blue T-shirt that said CHUCKY'S RIBS in white block letters. It was the Fourth of July and he was on his way to a softball game and picnic. "I wish y'all could come too," he said, smiling at my mother. "Eat some hot barbecue, drink some cold beer—then, later on, after dat ol' evenin' sun go down, just lay back on a blanket and, you know, let the fireworks begin. Should be quite a show—I bet we might even run into the good Reverend Bonnard himself kickin' up his heels—"

Ruth looked over at me—we were having coffee with Mrs. Williams in the kitchen—and said, "I'm afraid that's not exactly the sort of day we had planned—nice as it does sound."

Mrs. Williams snorted and shook her head. "Raymond Pat-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

terson, you just better do what you came for, and then go on and leave us alone to take care of ourselves."

"Yes, ma'am! Yes, ma'am!" he said. "Maybe I'll come back and check you out later."

"The hell you will." Mrs. Williams stood up and started collecting our cups and saucers.

"Where's Sarah then? I bet she'd like to go."

"She's outside watching some other fools play with fire. We told her she better not mess with that trash unless she wants to get herself burned." She turned on the faucet and started rinsing out the cups.

"Well, Mama knows best—that's what I always say, don't I, Mama?" He laughed.

"Raymond, you just better quit," she said. "Now just go on and do what you have to do. This girl wants all this mess over with—don't you, Rebecca?"

"The sooner the better," I said, trying to look cheerful.

Ruth was wearing the slightly glassy-eyed and expectant half-smile she gets when she isn't sure what she's supposed to say. There was a flirtatious tension in the air that was unmistakable and yet—given our circumstances, etcetera—totally unthinkable. I was actually blushing when Dr. Patterson followed me upstairs to give me the injection. I lay back on the bed, opened my legs, and closed my eyes like a Victorian virgin on her wedding night. Then he started pulling out the packing, and I had an image of myself unravelling.

"Oh, yes, the cervix has dilated very nicely," he said. "Now, all it takes is a little salt water . . . you won't even feel this go in—there, that's it . . . that's it . . . and now it's all over, you can relax . . . don't get up though, just stay right there and in a little while you'll feel the contractions begin—maybe sooner, maybe later. Once they start, Evangeline will tell you what to do. Just relax and let the contractions do their work. Then, when she tells you, bear down like you're going to the bathroom—the fetus is still small so it should be relatively easy."

"Compared to what?" I asked. His cool, confident tone was beginning to make me angry.

"Compared to actually giving birth," he said.

But it *was* like giving birth. I was in labor all afternoon, while Dr. Patterson was out playing softball and eating barbe-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cue. I hung on to Ruth and to Evangeline and I strained and sweated and felt something rupture deep down inside of me, rupture irreparably, and still it wouldn't come out, one great globe of pain just seemed to open up onto another, like an endless series of concentric Chinese boxes, each one egg-shaped and utterly impervious.

Evangeline had put a rubber mat under the sheets, and I lay in puddles of my own water and blood, soaking in sweat and groaning so steadily it turned into a chant. After a while, Evangeline took it up with me and pretty soon we had our own worksong. "Push, now baby, push—" she'd say. "Uhh, that's right, now, uhh—"

Ruth kept the washcloth cool against my forehead, and she was crooning along with us. The odd thing was, we all seemed to be singing. The windows were open too, and outside I could hear firecrackers going off and kids yelling and laughing, but over everything else there was the sound of the three of us chanting and crooning to one another.

"Almost over," Ruth kept saying, "almost over," and, "That's right, Becky, that's right," and then Evangeline said, "There it is, I've got it!" and I felt myself give way, as if a door I'd been straining against had suddenly burst open and sent me sailing headlong out into the unresisting air.

We couldn't see each other's faces in the dark; we could only hear each other's voices. Evangeline and Sarah; Ruth and me: we were sitting out in the small bricked-in yard behind Evangeline's house. They'd brought me outside because of the heat, and I was stretched out on a chaise longue looking up at the crescent of light shining from under the moon's lowered lid. What kept coming back to me was an impression of something slippery and coiled sliding into a metal pan and Ruth, thunderstruck, whispering before she could think not to: "A girl, it's a little girl—"

After it was over, they'd sponged me clean and changed the sheets on the bed and while my body settled back into place, still quaking with little interior tremors that were like the echoes of my contractions, I'd gone in and out of sleep. Sleep would come and go, and my tears would come and go, and after a while sleeping and waking, crying and not crying, came to feel so much alike it was hard to tell the difference,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as if each had met the other in some washed-out neutral place.

So time had passed and evening had come on and imperceptibly it had grown darker. Evangeline had brought me a cool, sweet soup and Ruth had held my hand while Sarah sang me a song about a journey. Now we were sitting outside in the dark. The tide had ebbed, you might say, and left us beached there on the shore, glad to be out of it, feeling as scoured as driftwood is by the currents we'd passed through. It was cooler out there and we thought we might be able to see the fireworks—but our angle of vision must have been wrong, all we could do was hear them. Somewhere on the other side of us, there'd be a string of small, popping explosions and then a great, ear-shattering BO-O-OM!, followed by the collective "Ah-h-h" of all the people who could see.

"That's all right, Sarah, never you mind," Evangeline said. "We don't need their old fireworks—we'll put on a show of our own."

"Yay!" Sarah shouted. "Sparklers!"

"Just hold it steady now, baby, and I'll light it for you. Keep it away from your face now, don't get burned—"

The sparkler fizzed into life, shooting out tiny spokes of light all around Sarah's outstretched fist. She lifted it up high, as if it were a wand or a torch, and we were all caught by the sparkler's incandescent sizzling. Then, gradually, the fiery white bead at its core dropped to a point just a few inches above Sarah's hand and went out. All that was left was a bright ember.

"Isn't that pretty!" said Ruth. "Just like a falling star!"

Sarah looked at it for a moment and then started whipping the burned-out stick through the air, streaking its red glow into ellipses and perfect circles of light, writing with it on the darkness.

That night Ruth lay beside me on the same bed I'd been straining on all afternoon. The fresh sheets were fragrant and stiff, and occasionally Ruth would lift the top sheet so it billowed, stirring the air as it settled slowly back into place with a soft crumpling sound.

"I'm sorry," Ruth was saying in a low, earnest voice. "I just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blurt things out sometimes without thinking. I'm not even sure it *was* a girl—I don't think you can really tell this early—"

I didn't say anything. My sinuses were swollen from crying and I was using my mouth to breathe.

"Becky?"

"It's all right," I said. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"It matters if you let it," Ruth said. "In something like this, if you let your feelings take charge you're lost—"

"Then I guess I must be saved," I said. "Because right now I just feel numb."

"Oh, Becky, I'm so sorry," Ruth was saying, and it was as if she hadn't heard me, as if she were talking to herself. "I'm not even sure it was a girl—it might've been a boy, you can't really tell—oh, God," she said, and then I could feel the bed start to tremble.

I reached over and held her hand. "Shhh," I said. "Shhh . . ." I was lying on my back looking up at the ceiling. "Don't even think about it," I said. "Just pretend it never happened." Ruth was squeezing my hand. Underneath me the bed went on trembling, but I felt perfectly calm, as removed from all of this as a bloodless angel is from the tempests of the sea.

The next morning Ruth put on a cheerful face and tried to pretend that everything was back to normal. She said she wanted to pay a courtesy call on Reuben Benjamin to thank him for his help. They hadn't actually seen each other for years. He turned out to be a very tall, frail-looking old man with grizzled white hair and antique, wire spectacles. He lived in a new high-rise apartment with a view of the Schuylkill, and he received us in a three-piece suit that hung down from his shoulders without actually seeming to touch the body inside of it. While he and Ruth talked and drank coffee, I looked out the window at two needle-like sculls gliding down the river. Every time the oars touched the water, there'd be a tiny glint of silver. Doctor Benjamin was so long and thin he reminded me of some kind of water strider himself, or maybe a dragonfly. His gaze drilled right into you and seemed to search out everything there was to know. Just before Ruth and I left, while the three of us were standing at the door, he tilted my chin up with his finger and looked down into my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eyes for a long moment. Then he began nodding his head as if he'd found what he was looking for. "You going to be all right," he told me. "Just fine. You going to have a long way to go, Rebecca, but I can see that you are a traveler." I wasn't sure what he meant, but I felt greatly reassured.

Two days later, though, when we got back home, the first thing I found out was that Robby Dodd had joined the Marines. I thought it was a sweet thing to do at first—an act of pure romantic ardor, like joining the Foreign Legion. But then, even before I left for college, he was off to boot camp, and the actuality of what he'd done finally began to sink in. To keep from feeling guilty, I wrote him faithfully throughout my freshman year, but in the spring—at about the same time my father was transferred to Edgewood Arsenal, in Maryland—Robby Dodd was shipped to Vietnam. The next fall I changed colleges, and after that, what with one thing and another, we completely lost touch. Sometimes I thought of him over there fighting in Vietnam, but I could never imagine Robby Dodd actually killing anybody. Whenever they showed newsclips of the war on TV, I always looked for him—but without ever having any luck.

Once, though, I did see a girl who looked like Sarah Williams. It was the fall of my senior year in college and I was living in Evanston, Illinois. The abortion had become something I never consciously thought about anymore—I'd completely put it behind me. Then one evening around dusk I was sitting at a stoplight on Lake Shore Drive, and there was Sarah Williams staring at me from the back window of a Trailways bus. The glass was tinted and I couldn't tell for sure if it was really her. I followed the bus for a long way past my destination, trying as hard as I could to get a better look. But after a while it got too dark to see and I pulled the car over to the side of the road and turned the engine off. Ahead of me, the bus's taillights kept receding through one intersection after another, finally blending into the general flow of traffic until I lost them altogether. Cars were streaming by, their headlights wheeling past me, the white, whishing noise of their passing coming and going like a pulse, and I just sat there with my hand on the ignition, holding my breath and waiting to find out what it was I might be feeling, poised like that for a long time, right there on the verge.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CARL WOOTON

A Reconciliation

1

I backed the hearse through the seawall gate onto the wharf and stopped about thirty yards from the end. A small crowd waited for the first sounds and sight of the sheriff's boat that was bringing back Matthew Trahan's body. They stood in small groups along the wharf and on the bank beside the seawall, and the murmur of their voices mixed with the sound of the river slapping against the creosoted pilings. They waited and watched Matthew's son, Louis, who stood at the end of the wharf and stared at the purple rise of a squall line moving up the river toward us. No one went all the way to the end to stand beside Louis, and I suppose anyone from out of town looking on would have thought the others all had a whole lot of respect for Louis in his grief. Truth was, some of the others were so afraid of Louis, they wouldn't have gone close to him if they'd had to pay to keep from it. A lot of folks thought he was at least borderline crazy because he had a terrible temper and liked to threaten everyone with some kind of violence, although he almost never did anything to anyone, unless he was drunk. The ones that weren't afraid of him would have said they just didn't like him.

I moved from group to group, listening to the talk and getting closer to Louis. I knew I had to get beside him, but I didn't want him to feel I was rushing at him. I stopped beside Milton Lattier, a barber, and Raymond Broussard, a loan officer at the bank. They were the closest to Louis but still fifteen or twenty feet away. Together we watched Louis rock back and forth on his heels and toes at the very end of the wharf. He was dressed in a conservative gray suit like he always wore. Some people said his clothes made him look older than Matthew. I had a crazy thought that it would not have taken more than a little bump to send Louis headfirst into the swirling river, and I looked around to make sure no one had noticed me thinking it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lattier asked, "Where's Theresa, Jules?"

I said, "I don't know, but I expect she'll be here pretty quick."

Everybody knew everybody was waiting for Theresa. Matthew's wife—and Louis's mother—was named Angelle, and she died in Hurricane Audrey in '57, when Louis was a little kid. After Angelle's death, Matthew had several lady friends, but Theresa Keller was the last one and the only one who ever moved in with him. From the beginning, Louis and Theresa acted like they hated each other the way a Cajun woman hates a roach in her kitchen. Some folks said it was because Louis couldn't stand his daddy sleeping with any other woman besides Angelle. A few said Louis was mad because Theresa wouldn't shack up with him instead. She was just four or five years older than he was, maybe forty-four or forty-fivish, and sometimes looked younger. Most men agreed she was a handsome woman, and there were half-a-dozen around town disappointed because Theresa had settled in with Matthew. At first I heard a lot of jokes about winter meeting summer and Matthew having one foot in the grave (he was only sixty-two but the younger ones especially couldn't understand yet how that wasn't really old; I was sixty-four). Others made remarks about Theresa having her hand in Matthew's pocket, but I knew they were wrong. I always leaned toward the theory about Louis not liking anybody taking his mother's place, but I wouldn't have bet my old hearse against the other one. Nobody believed Louis would have kicked Theresa—or any woman—out of bed, if he could manage to trip her so she'd fall on it.

Raymond said, "Think Theresa's gonna like Louis leaning over the edge of the dock like that to get at his daddy's body? Damned sure thing Matthew wouldn't want him there."

Lattier said, "Doubt if Matthew much cares right now. What you think, Jules?"

I was watching the curve of Louis's back, the sag of his shoulders. He looked small, as though the weight of the gray filling the sky ahead of the squall was pressing him into the wharf. It took me a bit to realize someone had said something to me.

"What's that?"

"I said I don't think Matthew's going to care much about

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who's standing on the end of the dock. Do you?"

A sheriff's car came through the gate in the seawall and stopped on the bank because my hearse blocked it from coming onto the wharf.

Raymond said, "Nothing would surprise me about Matthew." It nearly gave me a rash when others talked like they knew better than anyone else what the dead were like.

I said, "Not even Matthew will give a rat's ass. I guarantee it."

Lattier made a little jump, and Raymond just backed away a step. I overspoke myself, but I was distracted by the sight of a deputy helping Theresa Keller down from his patrol car. Sweat ran in my eyes, and I wiped my face with a handkerchief. Not even a cloud cover and the threat of rain can cool the August air when the wind turns from the south and blows nothing but wet heat from the Gulf across the swamp and into the town. The deputy tried to hold Theresa's arm as she walked across the rough ground in front of the seawall to the wharf, but she shook him off.

Lattier said, "She looks like she's ready to strike fire."

Raymond said, "I reckon it's her turn," and made a sound almost like a laugh.

Lattier said, "You might get fireworks at the funeral, Jules," and he and Raymond both laughed.

I said, "That's not funny."

At that time, I was also Chief of the Kiffeville Volunteer Fire Department, mainly because when I built a new garage for my hearses, I added space on the side to keep the fire engine. Theresa had called me once, screaming about Louis trying to burn her and Matthew alive. When we got to Matthew's house, we found all three of them—Louis, Matthew and Theresa—in the back and the grass around the back and one side of the house smoldering. What fire had been there, Matthew had already put out with a garden hose. Matthew was busy trying to calm down Theresa, and Louis sat on the ground up against a tree because he was too drunk to stand. That was nearly a whole year after Matthew moved Theresa into the house with him and Louis moved into the guest house in the back. We decided to use the hose from our pumper to wet down the yard, just in case, and because we needed the practice. What everybody remembers most is how

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Matthew took our hose and turned it on Louis and near drowned him. Might have if I hadn't cut off the water.

The wind picked up quickly, and the air all around was full of the moisture driven ahead of the actual rain. Louis and all of us had been straining to hear the high, winding sound of the motor of the boat, but there wasn't any way the thin sound of the motor ever would carry over the sounds of the river and the rising wind and the rain that was ahead of the boat. In a moment we all saw the rain, like a streaked, slate wall dropped from a bank of high, dark clouds—the purple had turned toward black—coming hard and fast up the river straight at us.

Someone said, "Goddamn, we're gonna get wet," and everybody ran for cover, except Louis and Theresa. I moved with Milton and Raymond and a half-dozen others as we jammed ourselves into a metal toolshed built halfway along the wharf. Most of the others ran for the opening in the sea-wall and their cars parked along the street on the other side. Even the deputy walking with Theresa ran back to his car, but Theresa kept on walking ahead until she was standing next to Louis. Theresa was about as tall as Louis. In fact, him slumping the way he was and her standing straight the way she did, she was taller. Even though I was looking at their backs, I could tell neither spoke to the other. The deputy must have made himself feel guilty about Theresa standing in the rain because just a couple of minutes later, he walked by with an open umbrella. He had put on his slicker, and he stood behind Louis and Theresa and held the umbrella over them, even though it didn't do much good. The way the wind had picked up out of the southeast, the rain came practically horizontal right into their faces. Ours too, since there wasn't any door on the shed we had crowded into. It wasn't so bad for me, because I was a little ways in the back. Lattier stood in the door and was so soaked he might as well have tried to keep dry by walking across the river.

Somebody in the shed asked, "What they trying to prove?"

Lattier said, "Won't neither one of them move, unless the other one does."

Because the rain slanting straight at us made it hard even to look down the river, the first sign we had of the boat coming was a shrill blast of its air horn. Somebody called my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

name, and the deputy motioned for me to come and take the umbrella. He needed both hands free to help tie down the boat when it pulled alongside the wharf. He was going to need both hands and wish he had more to help lift the body bag with Matthew in it up the ladder and onto the wharf. I obliged him and ran out into the rain and took the umbrella from him and kept it over Louis and, mostly, Theresa. There really wasn't room for three under the umbrella, and in half a minute the rain had soaked through my suit. A good thing it wasn't my best one.

The boat turned from the center of the river toward us, and Louis pointed and said, "There." I looked over his shoulder and saw the boat. It took a good while for it to get close enough for us to see the dark, plastic shape of the body bag lying on the rear deck. That was Matthew, and I hoped neither Louis nor Theresa was expecting me to fix him up to where he looked like he was just in some kind of natural sleep. I knew I wasn't even going to try after Matthew had been dead out there in the swamp for at least a couple of days. I just hoped the turkey vultures hadn't got to him or that he hadn't been in the water the whole time. And I hoped nobody would even think they wanted to look at him.

Louis looked back and said, "We'll have to bury him quick, Jules."

I said, "The quicker the better, Louis."

Theresa turned and looked straight at Louis. I thought she might be crying, but in the rain I couldn't really tell.

She said, "He wanted to be cremated." Her voice came hard at him, like it did sometimes, deep like a man's and more like she was throwing bricks instead of words.

Louis spun at her so fast that if I hadn't been standing right there and if I hadn't had a hand free to grab her arm, Theresa might have gone right off the wharf into the river. But I did grab her, and all in one motion she caught her balance and pulled free from me and faced Louis like they would've been in the middle of a ring. Raymond and some of the others back in the shed said it looked like that, with them two squaring off and me looking like the referee. Believe me, I didn't want the job. They looked hard at each other for a minute or more, until Louis turned his back on her.

He said, "Won't be no burning, Jules. I want him buried

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tomorrow." He looked over his shoulder at her. "You've got no say in this. You're not his wife." He turned again toward the deputy standing near the ladder that rose up out of the river and attached itself to the dock. Even in the rain, I heard Theresa sucking in breath, trying not to lose control.

She said again, "He wanted to be cremated. He told me so."

She turned toward me, and I wished I was almost anywhere else. She probably was right. Theresa wasn't the kind to lie about something that really mattered. Louis, on the other hand, sometimes forgot which fork of his tongue he had used last. But Louis was right about her not having any say; this time, at least, he had law on his side. Matthew had talked some about marrying her, but he hadn't done it.

I said, "I'm sorry, Theresa. It's up to Louis."

Louis said to me, "We're going to bury him in the ground, in a wood box." He looked down at the boat that was edging its way up to the wharf and stepped back a little from the edge. He looked at Theresa and said, "You can send flowers if you want to." Anybody with any feelings at all knew he didn't have to say that.

Theresa looked first like something had sprung out of the wet air and slapped her. Even there in the light made bad by the squall, I saw her turn pale, then just as quick, she was back in charge of herself. I maybe should've seen it coming, but I didn't. She reached up and took the umbrella I wasn't holding over anybody hardly since they had started moving around, and she swung around and started it, wide open with those little plastic tips on the end of its ribs sticking out, toward Louis's head. I saw that much and I grabbed at her and pulled her around so that the umbrella just sort of bounced off of Louis's back and fell on the wharf. I put my arms around her and pulled her close. She struggled for a moment, but it was half-hearted. She just kind of gave up whatever anger she had right then and leaned against me and shook like she was having a fever chill.

When the umbrella brushed against his back, Louis looked around and said, "What the hell?" and after a moment of just staring at Theresa, he said, "You better get her out of the rain, Jules." He sure didn't care about whether or not Theresa was getting wet, but I nodded at him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Some folks asked me why I even tried to protect Louis like that, and I never have figured out how to explain I really grabbed Theresa because I saw—any fool could have seen—the lady was in pain. And that's why I wanted to get her away from the end of the wharf, too. Raymond said later he saw we were about to have big trouble. Whatever he saw, he came running through the rain from the shed and took Theresa from me. She went from my arms to his without any effort at all, and she let him lead her away, back up the wharf. I watched them go for a bit, and Raymond seemed almost to be carrying her along. Her feet touched the boards one after another like she was walking, but Raymond looked like he was carrying all her weight.

Chief Deputy Wally Broussard (Did I mention he was the wife's first cousin? no relation to Raymond) had maneuvered the boat next to the ladder. The water was a little high and there were only three or four rungs distance between the deck of the boat and the floor of the wharf. Wally stood at the wheel, and a deputy dressed in a yellow slicker stood on the rear deck and watched over the black lump that was Matthew Trahan in a body bag. I looked down at the shiny, wet bag and had to step back to fight off a little dizzy feeling.

Wally shouted, "Catch that line," just as the deputy on the boat threw it. It fell on the boards of the wharf and lay there for a second until some motion of the boat made it start to snake slowly back toward the edge. Louis put his foot on it and looked down at it as though he had no idea what to do with it. The deputy who had brought Theresa moved Louis aside, picked up the line and secured it to a ring imbedded in the wharf.

The deputy on the wharf and I knelt on the boards by the ladder as the sheriff and the deputy on the boat picked up one end of the body bag and lifted it up high as they could against the ladder. The other deputy and I reached down and grabbed the bag. The rain on the slick plastic made all our grips uncertain. Wally slipped on the deck and had to reach out for the ladder to keep from falling, and almost all the weight of Matthew's body shifted to us up on the wharf.

The deputy next to me said, "He sure is a heavy mother." Truth was, Matthew was a small man, like Louis.

We felt the deputy on the boat give the bag a little push as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he yelled, "Make sure you don't let go up there."

I said, "We've got him." My arms felt like they might pull out of their sockets. "Get under and push!"

Others came out into the rain, and Milton Lattier squeezed between me and the deputy and grabbed the end of the bag and all of a sudden there was no more weight pulling on our arms and Matthew's body lay on the wharf. Then, without any prompting, we all backed away in order to give Louis room to get close. Louis looked down at the long lump in the bag, and a sadness crossed his face. It wasn't a look of the kind of grief that makes someone rage at the gods. It was just a gray sadness that seemed part of the gray air. (The wife doesn't believe it. She says it was just me wanting something to be there in his face. Whatever, I saw it.) Somebody behind me gasped, and I looked down at the body bag. Louis had reached out with his foot and touched the lump, and for a moment I think we all believed Louis would push Matthew's body off the wharf and into the river. We held our breaths.

Wally came up the ladder and said, "Louis!" and Louis pulled back his foot. The rest of us breathed again. If I'd known what was to happen, I might've been tempted to take an extra deep breath and help Louis drop Matthew's body into the current that swirled under the wharf. The wife says it's a good thing I didn't do anything rash, even though I should've seen something coming. Wally stepped onto the wharf, and we all were suddenly very busy.

Wally said, "Let's load him up, Jules, and get out of this rain."

I was all for it. A couple of other brave souls came out of the shed when they saw us reaching down to pick up the bag, and with a half-dozen of us lifting, Matthew didn't seem so heavy. The two deputies picked up an end, a couple of men from the shed grabbed the other end, and Wally and I walked across from each other holding onto the middle. The wet made it hard to keep a grip and we had to stop a couple of times on the way to the hearse. Louis didn't help carry his father. He walked behind instead, almost like he was making a principle out of not having a share in the load.

As we lifted Matthew into the hearse, Wally asked me if I had called the coroner. I shut the back door and told Wally that Henry LeBlanc (same last name as mine, but no relation)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had said he would look at the body at my place. We both knew Henry wasn't coming out to the wharf in this rain. What Henry had told me simply was, "If Wally says it's Matthew and he's dead, I'll take his word for it. I'll examine the body at your place."

Louis said, "What happened?"

Wally looked at him like he didn't understand. He told me later it was because of the way Louis had said it, without grief or any other kind of strong feeling. "What happened?" sounded just like he might've said, "What day of the week is Tuesday?"

Wally said, "Looks like he must have fallen off the dock getting stuff out of his boat, then tried to crawl out of the water. He was half in the water and half on the bank when I found him. Half his supplies were still in his boat. The rest were in the cabin. Henry'll have to look at him before I can tell you official."

All this talk, of course, was going on in the rain. Wally and the other deputies had slickers, but the rest of us didn't and I would've been glad to get into the hearse and out of the rain. We walked toward the front, and I had my hand on the door when Louis said, "Ain't that cute!" and pointed toward the sheriff's car parked in front of my hearse.

The deputy that drove the car there said, "Christ!," and ran to open the back door on the side nearest us. Theresa sat in the back seat, her face contorted with shouting that we couldn't hear, and she pounded on the window with her fists. It was like a weird pantomime. Raymond had taken her after she missed Louis with the umbrella and had kindly gotten her out of the rain by putting her in the back seat of the sheriff's car. He hadn't thought about the back seat being made for transporting prisoners and not having knobs on the inside for the doors or windows. Theresa had looked like she had been beaten and terribly frail when Raymond took her from me earlier, but when the deputy opened that door, there wasn't any sign of frailty. She came out of the car charging at Louis, and several who saw her said she probably would've thrown him and pinned him to the wharf if Wally hadn't blocked her off.

She shouted at Louis. She cursed him. She said so much I can't remember it right. And Louis shouted and cursed back

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at her and Wally kept telling them both to shut up as he maneuvered Theresa back toward the car. It took him a while, but he finally did it after he turned and shouted at Louis so loud that Louis backed off and got quiet, even though he kept calling Theresa, "bitch," under his breath.

The deputy opened the front door this time, and Wally helped Theresa while he promised her he'd be by to pick her up and make sure she had a ride to everything that was going to happen. He looked back at me when he said that, and I nodded, meaning if he somehow couldn't get her himself, I'd see to it for him. He shut the door and the deputy drove off with her sitting straight and watching everything hard as the car turned around. It was like she admitted she had had a bad moment back there on the end of the wharf, but there would be no repeating that kind of weakness. From that point on, she would be ever on the lookout. The wife said the rest of us should've worked a little harder at looking out.

Louis stepped up beside me and said, "I'll come by later and make arrangements, but I'll tell you now I don't want him waked. I want him buried tomorrow and I don't want any service except the one at the grave. You can call the priest for that if you want to." And he walked away, through the open gate of the seawall, turned and disappeared. Even though Louis hadn't called him by name, the priest was Father Expadee Mouton, just Ex to Matthew and me and several others around who grew up with him. The priest wasn't exactly high on Louis' list of favorite people, especially since Ex had had him arrested for breaking and entering the church one night that Louis had been drinking and couldn't find his way home. Louis said he wanted a place to sleep, and Ex dropped the charges. Even though I knew Louis wasn't one likely to forgive or forget, I told the wife about him saying it was all right to call Ex. I even told her maybe Louis was capable of doing a decent thing after all because Matthew would have wanted Ex to pray over him. She said I shouldn't make hasty judgments.

With the sheriff's car carrying Theresa gone, and with Louis walking away through the rain that acted like it might never stop, and with Matthew's body closed up in the back of the hearse, there wasn't any reason for me to get any wetter. I drove home thinking about Matthew in the back and about

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Louis being nasty and Theresa coming out of that sheriff's car like she had a divine mission to rid us all of Louis forever.

A couple of times I looked back at the more or less shapeless form of the body bag with Matthew in it, and I grieved for my friend and thought he deserved something better than the way Louis was acting. I noticed, too, a mixture of water and mud seeping from the bottom of the bag, and I knew I had a good half day's work ahead of me shampooing the carpet on the floor of the hearse. I figured the wife might shine the inlaid chrome tracks made for sliding caskets in and out almost effortlessly, if I asked her nice.

2

Henry LeBlanc, Deputy Coroner, said a heart attack killed Matthew, and I remembered Matthew's notions about the weakest molecule. He used to talk sometimes about how terrible it was a man had to live knowing that his life depended on the weakest molecule in his body and someday that molecule would give out and that would be it. He always said it like he was reading back a grocery list. It was no big deal, just a fact. The official cause Henry wrote on the death certificate was *myocardial infarction.*

Henry said, "He didn't have a chance. I doubt if he felt himself hit the ground."

Henry finished what he had to do, and I did what I had to do, all the time feeling strange about working on Matthew's body. It was hard to do a good friend, and the body was in such bad shape it took me a few hours. I admit it probably took a little longer than it should have just because it was Matthew. The wife wanted to bring me some supper on a tray, but I told her I'd rather wait until I finished. She noticed I had unplugged the phone so I could work without being interrupted.

She said, "Theresa called. She wants you to call her."

"What about Louis?"

Louis hadn't called. She said thirty or forty others had wanted to know about arrangements, and she had had a hard time explaining there not being any wake. That seemed close

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to violating the highest moral law to most of the people who lived around here. A couple of the callers even told her it wasn't natural. I sympathized with them, but it just wasn't up to me. The wife flat out agreed with most of the callers, especially with the wives of the men who had been at the wharf and had seen how Louis and Theresa had acted. When I told her it was true I had stopped Theresa from hitting Louis with the umbrella, all she said was, "I never!" and when I told her how he told Theresa she could send flowers, she said, "I'm not surprised," and added, before she went back to the house to answer the phone calls, "The least Louis could do is to let us have a rosary. And he would, if he had an ounce of decency in him."

I said, "Don't you start nothing, now."

She said, "It won't hurt anybody if we have a rosary," and she didn't wait for me to tell her to leave well enough alone, not that her waiting for me to say it would have made any difference.

Our house sat thirty feet to the side of the home. The two buildings were joined by a canopied walk. When we started in business, we lived in an apartment in the rear of the home. The wife didn't seem to mind the business, but she really didn't like sleeping with just a wall between us and the embalming room. She didn't believe in ghosts, but nonetheless she said it made her feel like *something* was watching her whenever there was a body just in the next room. And there were some things a decent woman couldn't do, at least not the way she'd like to do them, if she felt like she was being watched. So soon as I could, we built a separate house, and that made a lot of things between us a whole lot better.

Matthew used to tease me by saying, "Only reason you built that house was because she didn't want to give you any with a corpse lying in the next room."

I always told him, "Best reason I know for building a house or anything else."

He'd say, "Damned right!" and we'd laugh and drink a little more brandy.

When I finished with Matthew's body and went to the house for my supper, the wife said, "I called Father Expadee, and he said he'd do the rosary if Louis agrees. Louis is in the living room. Why don't you ask him about it?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I thought it was kind of late, after seven already, but the wife said all she had to do was call a couple of ladies and they'd get the word out and the rosary could start at 8:30 and everybody be on their way home by nine.

I said, "Louis already told me he don't want a wake."

"Don't want to wake anybody. All we want to do is say some prayers. Tell him." There wasn't any point in commenting on how "ask him" had moved to "tell him."

Louis didn't beat around any bush once I went to meet him.

"You understood what I said about arrangements this afternoon?"

I told him I did, and he wanted to know if I could be sure to get everything done and over with the next day. I assured him it could all be done, but it would be best to plan for late afternoon, on account of digging the grave and all the other preparations that had to be made. He stood in front of my desk and fidgeted from one foot to the other, and he hardly looked at me while he was there. At some point he handed me a sheet of paper with a half-dozen names written on it in pencil.

"Pallbearers," he said.

His list didn't have any surprises. I would've picked the same ones nearly. He declined my offer to show him the caskets. He said he trusted my taste, and I could choose it, "wood, and not too expensive." I told him he didn't have to worry. I didn't plan to take advantage of the family of my best friend, and he said he figured I'd say something like that. I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not. Even though I could hear the hum of the air conditioner blowing cool air through the vents, the room got warm. I said I'd do my best and set the services for four the next afternoon at the family gravesite in the new cemetery beside the highway. (It wasn't very new, but we called it that to show we weren't talking about the old cemetery behind St. Ann's Catholic Church.) He said he'd appreciate someone picking him up fifteen minutes before, and I agreed I'd be pleased to arrange it. Then I told him the wife had suggested having a rosary.

"What the hell for?"

"She just thinks it's a right thing to do. Some of Matthew's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

friends been asking if maybe we could do that. It wouldn't hurt nothing, would it?"

His dark eyes turned darker, and his brow made a crease. "Will *she* be there?"

I told him I didn't know, but I was sure she'd want to be if somebody thought to call her and tell her there was going to be a rosary. Then he wanted to know who would lead the prayers, and I told him Father Ex had already told the wife he would.

I waited a second before I said, "He said it was up to you."

He said, "That ought to be nice, the priest and Matthew's whore praying together. Don't let anybody expect me to be there."

When I went back to the kitchen for my supper and told the wife about the conversation, she said, "Wouldn't hurt him to smooth the crease in his pants praying for his father." Then she asked, "Did you call Theresa?" and she knew I hadn't even before I looked up at her. "I'll call her. You better eat so you can get dressed."

Maybe thirty people were in the main parlor of the home by the time I put on a clean suit. Most of them were women, but Raymond Broussard, Milton Lattier, and probably a half-dozen other men came with their wives. Father Ex was there, of course, and several of the women our age were attending to him. I've never understood why so many middle-aged women, at least women from around here, seem so fascinated by a priest. Matthew used to say they loved Ex because they knew he was safe. I told that to the wife once, and she said what Matthew and I didn't know about women would fill the library at the college in Lafayette. I didn't dispute her.

Wally showed up with Theresa just as Ex was getting set to call everybody to order. I didn't actually see them come in, but I knew she was there when I heard some of the women gasp and all of a sudden the small buzz of talk picked up until it sounded like a bunch of crippled crickets caught in a tub. Folks sure are strange. Some of the women who wouldn't talk to Theresa when she was "living in sin" with Matthew, were the first ones to go up to her and act like it was one of their own had died. They were mostly widows. Some of the ones that weren't widows might have been practicing. The wife said, "Or wishing. Fools!" Ex greeted her like she might

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have been leading a train of saints, or coming to make a major contribution to the building fund.

Theresa was dressed like a movie widow: black dress, black hat—the only time I ever saw her wear a hat—and a veil. Black dresses, naturally, are a common thing around here, but not the hat and veil. That's strictly city or, like I said, movie kind of stuff. The costume may have made some folks stare at her, but before she got halfway across the room, most of us stared because she looked so handsome and elegant.

She walked right up to Ex, shook his hand, and said, "Why don't we get started, Father?"

Ex doesn't often look like somebody got the edge on him, but he showed it that time. Raymond said he didn't see it, but Milton agreed with me. The wife said he didn't have to show it; everybody knew it anyway, because they all knew Theresa wasn't anybody's fool, even if some men might think she was just because she was a woman. I swear he looked around for somebody to help, but the message didn't get received. He stood there and smiled at her, tipped his bald head toward her and asked, "Is there anything special you want me to say about Matthew?"

She said, "Just pray, Father," and she must have seen him flinch, too—because she said, "Whatever you want, Father. You're better at it than I am."

Ex said the prayers and the people clacked their beads in their fingers. He said the first decade of Hail Marys in English, the next one in French, and on like that through all five decades of the rosary. I wasn't quite up off of one knee yet when Wally tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, "Come see," in my ear. I followed him out of the home onto the front porch.

He said, "You got any idea why them two what works for Matthew would be loading firewood on that flatbed truck of his?"

"The red one?"

"Damned near all that wood Matthew had stacked up behind his workshop in his back yard."

That was a lot of wood, most of it oak and pecan from trees Matthew had had to cut in the last couple of years.

I said, "Didn't you ask them?"

"They said 'cause Theresa told them to. Said they worked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for her now. Said they wouldn't work a day for Louis, but they'd probably do about anything for her. And on the way over here, I asked her, and she says she's just cleaning things out. Says it was something Matthew wanted done."

"You don't believe her?"

"I didn't say that."

"I expect we'll find out soon enough."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

The folks started coming out of the home right then, and Wally left me to get Theresa. I thanked Raymond and Milton for helping out on the wharf that afternoon, and Raymond told me he had apologized to Theresa for locking her in the sheriff's car. Some of the ladies thanked me for having the rosary, and I told them to thank the wife. Wally came out with Theresa, and she had pulled up her veil. She sort of smiled at me and shook my hand and Wally took her away. I wanted a chance to talk to her, to tell her I was sorry Matthew had died, because I loved him, too, and that I did see how much pain she was in on the dock, but the circumstance didn't present itself just right. The wife says I was just being chicken, but she didn't blame me too much because she couldn't have done it either, not with all those folks standing around watching. She had a point.

Everybody was gone just a little time after nine. I locked up and went around again just to double check all the doors, and for the first time that evening I had a chance to feel how tired I was. In another half hour, we were in bed. I always turn out the last light, and the wife opens the curtains in the bedroom so she can see the sky at night.

We were in bed awhile when I said, "That was a nice thing you did, arranging the rosary."

She said, "You didn't get to clean the hearse."

I said, "I'll do it in the morning."

"If I get my work done, I'll clean the chrome."

We didn't say anything else, but we didn't fall asleep right away, either. The rain had stopped a little while before, but the sky was still clouded, with no stars shining through the window. We lay there awake in the dark—I knew she was awake by her breathing—and we thought our own thoughts I guess about the day and the next day coming. I don't know what she thought about. Me, I thought about Matthew and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the turkey vultures and Theresa swinging the umbrella at Louis, and, Louis with his foot on Matthew's body, and finally, I got ticked off with Wally for telling me about those two men loading all that firewood on Matthew's old truck and Theresa lying about just cleaning up. I really wished he hadn't told me. The wife found my hand and held it, and in a few minutes, I could tell she was sleeping. If she had stayed awake a little longer, she would have seen the moon come out from behind the clouds.

3

First thing I did next morning, after a cup of coffee in the shade on the back steps of the house, was call Blaine Segura, the caretaker at the cemetery. He knew which grave to get dug, and I told him I'd be out later to check on the placement of the canopy to keep the sun off the mourners. Blaine had retired from the Southern Pacific Railroad, and he did the cemetery job for practically nothing, he said to keep his brain from turning to the consistency of headcheese. I trusted Blaine to do everything right, while I spent the morning cleaning and shining the hearse.

A couple of hours later, Wally called and asked if I had seen or heard from Theresa, and I had to tell him I hadn't.

He said, "Damn!" and went on to explain he couldn't find her or "them two what worked for Matthew." He meant Jimmy Rose and Gerald Simon, the ones he had seen loading firewood on Matthew's truck the night before. Jimmy was white, Gerald was black, and they both had worked for Matthew around his hardware store and his properties (that's what he called the dozen or so rent houses he owned in town). More than one had asked Matthew why he kept them on, and he usually answered with something like because sometimes they come to work sober enough to get something done. The general impression was they'd both put themselves in front of a bulldozer if they thought Matthew wanted it. Matthew had had to bail Jimmy out of jail at least twice because somebody in one of those bars back-of-town he went to had cast doubt on Theresa's virtue.

Wally said, "The truck's gone, too."

"What truck?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Matthew's red truck. The one I told you they were putting all the firewood on."

I said, "I haven't seen them. Why'd you go looking for them in the first place?"

He said, "What you think they're going to do with all that wood Matthew had them cut up for burning?"

I had no idea what they planned to do with that wood, but I had work to do. I needed to finish polishing the hearse. He muttered something not worth repeating and hung up on me. When I went back to the hearse, the wife was there shining the chrome, and I hadn't even asked her. Of course she asked me why her cousin had called, and I told her everything, even how he seemed so worried.

She said, "You don't find them loading firewood at night in the summer a little strange?"

I said, "I guess so, but that doesn't make it something I ought to worry about."

She said, "Wally doesn't waste his worrying."

That was usually true, but I couldn't see how this thing that was agitating Wally had anything to do with me. I still had work to do. Right after lunch I went out to the cemetery to check on things. Blaine was at the gravesite, finishing up. He had put up the canopy, spread out the grass carpet, and put the casket lowering device in place over the grave. He had almost everything arranged, even to having the folding chairs set out in rows under the canopy. Then I noticed the unusual arrangement. He had set up the back three rows with a dozen chairs in each row, but the front row had only two chairs set wide apart.

I asked, "How come you did it like that?"

He reached down and pulled out a wrinkle in the grass carpet and looked around like he'd like to find another one before he answered me, and then he looked more at the empty grave than he did at me.

He said, "Theresa come out a while ago. She wants it that way."

I looked at the two empty chairs a moment and said, "I don't imagine Louis wants any closer than she does."

I told Blaine to leave the chairs the way they were. I needed to get back to the home. If I had had a little more time, I might have gone up the slight rise to the top of the coteau—that's what we call a ridge—on the other side of the cemetery

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to look at the mausoleum that the contractor had been saying for over a month was almost finished. The wife says that's wishful thinking after the fact, and I probably would have come straight home the way I did even if I'd had more time. Besides, she said, what would I have done if I had seen Matthew's truck with the load of wood stacked on the back of it and those two men of Matthew's sitting on the ground in the shade of the truck? It was a fair question.

While I was changing suits to get ready for the funeral, the wife came in the room and said, "Hope you're ready for a crowd. Blaine's wife called and told me about the way Theresa had him set up the chairs. You can bet I wasn't the first one she called."

"I better call Wally."

"I already did that. He said you better send somebody else for Theresa so's he can help with the traffic. Who's going to ride in the family car?"

There wasn't much point in having a family car in the procession. Matthew had some cousins around, but he hardly knew who they were. He never had been big on being close with family. That was one thing about him people around here had a hard time understanding. A couple of his dead wife's relatives had been at the rosary, and I doubted there'd be many more at the funeral, unless they were just powerfully curious.

I said, "We'll send one for Louis and the other one for Theresa. I'll get Raymond to drive Theresa." I had already hired a driver to pick up Louis.

The wife was right about Blaine's wife working up a pretty good crowd. Nearly sixty or seventy people showed up to get in the procession, and most of them looked half miserable all dressed up, the men especially, with ties and coats on. The sun blasted down on the ground still wet from the squall the day before, and the wetness just rose up into the air and stuck to everything and made everything stick to everything else. Even Matthew's casket felt sticky as I ran my hands over the highly polished cherry wood that I knew would satisfy Louis, even if the price was a little higher than the middle range he had asked for. I figured whether or not Louis ever paid me, I put my friend Matthew in a casket that wouldn't shame him.

The wife rode up front in the hearse with me, and the pro-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cession went along just fine. There was hardly any traffic (there never is a lot of traffic in Kiffeville), and we got to the cemetery a few minutes ahead of schedule. The canopy beside the grave was visible from the road, and the driveway that went into the center of the cemetery was already lined with cars on both sides. We even had to stop the procession a couple of times for people to come move cars they had parked wrong, but we soon were there. I got out of the hearse and opened the back door for the pallbearers. It was right then I saw and heard Blaine Segura's dirty white pickup truck come out from behind the under-construction mausoleum and tear down the access road on the other side of the cemetery like something had scared him. He turned toward the highway and disappeared right away in the direction of town. I guessed he must have had something he had to do and he was hurrying in order to get back in time to fill in the grave when the ceremony was over.

I didn't think long about Blaine leaving because just then the car I had sent for Louis turned into the cemetery, horn blowing and tires squealing on the hot pavement. The driver I sent with the car later said Louis had threatened to beat him on the street if he didn't let Louis drive. That sounded right, and when I got close I could tell Louis had been drinking. He wasn't swacked out of his head or even noticeably unsteady on his feet, but his breath was heavy enough to give a strong man a headache. But it was his costume that got the attention of everybody gathering around to pay their last respects to his father. Louis wore a tan suit, a patterned sport shirt open at the collar, and four different style gold neck chains.

Louis come up to me and said, "Let's go, Jules."

I looked at my watch and said, "We've still got a couple of minutes, Louis."

"No need to wait, Jules. He's already dead."

The wife says right then she thought Louis was about as sensitive as a marble tombstone while it still had the shape of a rock. I was glad to see Raymond's car turn off the highway and come up the driveway.

When Theresa walked up to us, Louis said, "I'll be damned."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theresa looked him straight in the eye and in the softest, calmest voice, she said, "That's not for me to say, but I know you didn't expect me not to be here."

"Don't matter to me, unless you think you're going to bring him home with you."

The place suddenly got very quiet, like the way most folks think a graveyard should be. The wife stepped between them, took Louis by an arm and steered him toward the gravesite. I heard her talking low to him. I heard her mention "your momma" and "your daddy's friends" in that tone of voice she used whenever she thought it was time to tell someone how cows ate their cabbage. Whatever she said, she got him moving toward the gravesite. I motioned to Raymond, and he gave Theresa a little pressure on her elbow. I'd still bet every man there watched her. She wore a black suit that was more stylish than Kiffeville was used to seeing, and there was no hat or veil. I swear, Matthew would have been proud.

The next ten minutes went as well as they could have, better than some had expected. Ex waited at the grave, bald and too heavy, dressed in his white vestments, with an altar boy on either side of him. The ritual itself is short, but Ex put in a few extra words about Matthew for his friends. In one of his prayers he even included a plea for reconciliation between any there who needed it. He was the only one not looking at Louis and Theresa by the time he said "Amen." Those two sat on their chairs set apart from one another and in front of everybody else and listened. Theresa dabbed at her eyes with a hankie, Louis looked straight ahead, Ex sprinkled holy water on the coffin and turned Matthew's spirit over to God, and it was over.

The people lingered a little longer than usual. The wife says they got cheated out of a wake and didn't get to grieve right, so they held back and tried to make up for it there by the grave itself. I kind of thought they were mostly waiting to see if maybe something might really happen between Louis and Theresa, but it looked like they were bound to be disappointed. Louis and Theresa both hung around the coffin. There still wasn't any conversation between them. Theresa looked most of the time like she was struggling to hold back what she was feeling, and Louis appeared glad to have the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

business over with.

I did my best to usher folks toward their cars, and I kept looking for signs of Blaine. It wasn't like him not to be there to finish the burial immediately after the mourners left the service. The driveways built through the cemetery were too small, and almost as soon as people did start leaving, there was a traffic jam. I looked toward the highway and saw Wally and another deputy trying to get the cars to move out.

Most of the people and their cars were going, moving slowly and steadily out of the cemetery, when I heard the noise of a large motor starting up somewhere in the direction of the unfinished mausoleum. I thought Blaine must have come back without me seeing him. I heard the machine grind into gear and the pitch of the motor change as it began to move. Then I saw it, and I didn't believe it. It wasn't Blaine and his dirt moving machine. It was them two that worked for Matthew, and they drove a forklift, or rather the black man, Simon, drove it hard and fast with Jimmy Rose standing behind him, holding on with one hand and waving the other hand in the air so's he looked like a rodeo clown. They came like they had been hurled out of the empty mausoleum and were hell-bent on a greasy slide, but it became clear real quick, they knew what they were up to.

It's hard to tell what happened next, hard to tell it right, anyway. There was so much yelling and cursing and people trying to get in the way of the forklift and get out of its way even faster because Gerald Simon didn't look like he would stop for anyone. I never before or since saw a look like that on any man's face. It wasn't just determination. It was more like knowledge. He knew exactly what he was going to do, if he had to go down and come back up the steps of Hell to get it done.

He drove right through the canopy, knocked down and tore up chairs, and with Louis screaming and trying to climb on the machine, Gerald Simon put the fork under that coffin slick as it could be done. Louis ran to the other side of the machine and disappeared. For a minute I thought he had got run over, but he was just knocked down. The wife shouted at Jimmy Rose and he grinned at her and made a motion like he was waving hello. Simon pulled a lever and Matthew's casket raised five or six feet up in the air. With the coffin on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fork, he backed away and headed back toward the mausoleum, and Raymond said he was going to get Wally and took off running for the road.

I can't swear what Theresa was doing all this time, but when Simon lifted Matthew's casket up in the air, she looked at me as though she was surprised I hadn't expected something like this to happen all along. I took a look toward the road and saw Raymond still running, hardly halfway there yet. Something moved, and I saw Louis rush at Theresa, calling her bitch and whore and whatever he could think of that might be worse. The wife said she was sure he was going to hit her, and he might have if she hadn't raised her hand and pointed at the forklift moving away from us. He—all of us—ran after it.

When I think on it, I think that must have been a real sight. Wasn't any of us running, young enough to run. Some just hobbled faster than others, and the women, wearing heels the way they do, it's lucky Theresa and the wife somehow missed breaking an ankle. And more than a couple of times I stopped and sucked air when the forklift hit a bump and the casket bounced and tilted a little bit. When Gerald Simon turned the forklift to go behind the mausoleum, then I saw Jimmy Rose on the front, sitting on Matthew's coffin and holding on to the lift. He was looking back and grinning like a little kid who just found out he could do something all the bigger kids had dared him to do. Gerald Simon's expression hadn't changed. The wife said when she saw his face the only thing she could think was, "Pity the brick wall that gets in his way." A brick wall was nothing. The Devil himself would have taken one look at Gerald Simon and jumped out of his way.

By the time we got to the large unused area (little more than a couple of acres) behind the mausoleum, Simon had already put Matthew's casket on top of a wood scaffold built in the middle of the bed of Matthew's old red truck. All that firewood Wally had worried about was stacked under and all around the scaffold with Matthew's body on top of it, and I didn't have to get real close to catch the smell of diesel fuel. They had soaked the stack of wood. I shouted at Jimmy Rose to stop. He was pouring gasoline over the casket and all around on the bed of the truck. Simon backed the forklift

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

away and drove it off a good ways. When he walked back, he told us we'd better get back and keep everybody else back because there was going to be some burning.

I said, "Theresa, this is against the law!"

She said, "Matthew wanted to be cremated. I told you that, and you wouldn't do nothing about it. He was your best friend."

"It's against the law, doing it this way. You can go to jail for this."

Louis said, "This is the craziest damned thing I ever heard of," and I looked at him because there was something in the way he said it that was different, wasn't like anything I had ever thought I would hear when Louis spoke. His eyes were wide, and he stared at the casket that looked like it might teeter off its scaffold. He stared at it and said the same thing over and over again, "the craziest damned thing ever."

Gerald Simon and Jimmy Rose didn't stop to talk with us. They were busy and next thing was Jimmy Rose was moving away from the truck toward the mausoleum with a five-gallon can of gas, leaving a trail that went about halfway across the grassy field. Gerald Simon was herding us back ever farther. I kept trying to talk to Simon, telling him he might go to jail for doing this, that cremations had to be done in a crematorium in Lafayette or New Orleans, but he just kept nudging us away from the truck with its wood and gas and Matthew's casket. Every now and then I heard the wife saying someday Theresa would wish she hadn't done this, but Theresa wasn't listening.

Wally came around the corner of the mausoleum just in time to see Jimmy Rose drop a match on the ground, and all of us watched a sliver of flame rush across the grass, until it suddenly surged toward the truck and there was a huge sound like the wind burst that breaks a window.

Gerald and Jimmy both were pushing us, trying to get us to the other side of the mausoleum, and I realized they had rigged the whole business so the gas tank under the bed of the truck would blow, too. (They had a strip of cloth that acted like a wick pushed through holes they had drilled in the truck bed and the gas tank.) I helped them push the others around the corner of the building just in time. We heard the explosion, and when we looked back, there was nothing to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

see but flame and the outline of the truck and a dark mass in the center.

Jimmy Rose said, "*That*'s a fire!" Didn't anybody disagree with him.

That's what happened. That's the way it happened, near as I can tell it. It was just a few years ago. There were some problems that had to be worked out, but in a place like this was then, we worked them out. The Volunteer Fire Department, and quite a few other folks, came out and stayed with us while we watched the fire burn. The wife nudged me sometime well after the moon was up and made me look at Theresa and Louis standing in the doorway to the mausoleum. They were talking, and by the time the fire was just a mounded glow in the darkness, they had agreed to bury what they could in the empty grave. Next morning, we got a steel-lined box, and me and Blaine used some tools to pick up, well, let me just say it turned out more or less all right. We didn't have another service, of course, and about the only thing left hanging for a little while was the question of the law. The district attorney came and talked to everybody, and a week or so later, he told all of us—the wife, Louis, Theresa, Jimmy Rose, Gerald Simon, and Blaine—that he would press charges only if one of the principals filed a complaint. Nobody wanted to do that, and the matter was closed.

So it was closed, but that didn't mean everything was satisfactory. I would have liked to have sent my best friend to his resting place with a little more dignity and a lot more attention being paid to him than was paid to Theresa and Louis. Louis moved back into Matthew's house, and Theresa moved into an apartment in a complex Matthew had bought for her. She stayed in town a couple of months, and I saw her a few times when I went downtown. She didn't wear black the way the older women thought she should. She dressed sometimes like she was going to a party, but I couldn't see she had anything to do. I wondered how she kept body and soul together, and Raymond told me Matthew had left her some insurance, plus the rent from the apartment complex. Then one day she was gone, and every now and then someone would say he heard she was in New Orleans, and that seemed probably right.

Louis was different. He closed the hardware store, just put

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a padlock on it and went to the dogs. He went three or four days without shaving, wore the same clothes too many days in a row, let the house go almost to ruin, wouldn't cut his grass, drank too much, and there didn't seem much anyone could do to pull him out of himself. There weren't more than one or two even willing to try. Then one day, Louis was gone too, him and, according to Raymond, his own cash and all the cash Matthew had left him, with instructions to send the money from the rent houses every month to a big bank in New Orleans. It wasn't long after that, I retired. Like the wife said, "About time!" Sold the home and the house, bought a smaller house and an R.V., and we've been seeing some country. But we always come home.

On our last trip, we stopped in New Orleans on the way back. The wife likes to go to early Mass in the old St. Louis church and have beignets and coffee before the crowds start. We had done that and were walking back to our car when I stopped and looked at a couple feeding the birds on the other side of Jackson Square. I pointed them out to the wife. The man turned. He looked like Louis, but he didn't look like Louis. He had on a dark suit with a dark tie, and his hair was gray. He slouched and walked with a slight limp. He looked like Matthew: dressed, walked and hunched his shoulders like Matthew. The woman who was with him was slightly taller than he was, and she wore a light-colored summer dress. He turned back and walked away from us again. He held the woman's arm as they walked away, and their heads leaned toward each other from time to time. We watched them for only a minute or so, until they went out of the gate on the other side of the square and disappeared.

The wife squeezed my arm, and I said, "I don't think so."

She said, "It couldn't be!"

We had come all the way through Baton Rouge and were almost to Lafayette when the wife said, "Do you think it was her?"

I said, "He looked more like Matthew than himself!"

We were nearly home when she said, "I never!"

I said, "Neither me."

Far as I know, nobody else has put this down. The wife says she won't talk about it, not ever again. She says there's some things decent people don't repeat.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FREDERICK BROWN

Zola and Manet: 1866

Born in Paris on April 2, 1840, Emile Zola was raised in Aix-en-Provence, where his father, an Italian engineer, had been hired by the municipality to build waterworks. François Zola died just as construction began and prospects of wealth turned into a nightmare of litigation from which his widow emerged penniless. This loss marked Emile for life. Another loss occurred when Madame Zola took her seventeen-year-old son north to Paris. Torn from his bosom friends, Paul Cézanne and Jean-Baptistin Baille, he drifted unhappily through late adolescence, failing the baccalaureate examination, vainly seeking employment, and discovering the grim side of bohemia, which meant, among other things, living in squalor with a prostitute named Berthe.

In 1862, fortune smiled on him. He was given a clerkship by Hachette and Company but soon became the firm's publicity director and in that position established a network of contacts throughout the newspaper world. He also produced a novel entitled *La Confession de Claude* (having previously written quantities of bad verse in the style of Musset). Four years at Hachette persuaded him that he could earn his livelihood in journalism. Indeed, he had already contributed long articles to *Le Salut Public*, a Lyon paper. And so he made the leap, quitting Hachette at about the same time he was moving in with Gabrielle Meley, whom he later married.

Illegitimate birth made Gabrielle Meley a lifelong revisionist who could not bury the past deep enough ever to feel altogether secure in the edifice of her respectability. Baptized Eléonore Alexandrine, she styled herself "Gabrielle" during adolescence, but insisted, once her relationship with Zola became conjugal, that people call her Alexandrine, discarding the agnomen like an outworn garment. Her looks belied her background. "Tall, olive skinned, distinguished, with the as-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tonishing coal-black eyes of some Velasquez princess" is how Huysmans described her in 1877, and this portrait would have done her justice twelve years earlier, when, at twenty-five, she began to fix Zola's attention.

The little we know about her early life leaves no doubt that it had often been stormy. Born in 1839 to an eighteen-year-old hatter named Edmond Jacques Meley and a seventeen-year-old florist named Caroline Louise Wadoux, she survived childhood while depending for nurture on relatives more than on her parents, whose liaison was tenuous. In 1848, Edmond Jacques took a wife and there is reason to believe that time spent under the dominion of this woman brought Gabrielle—or Alexandrine as we shall identify her henceforth—constant grief. Matters did not improve until her mother, in turn, got married. With Louis Deschamps, a riding master by profession, Caroline set up house in the Sentier district. Their ménage lasted only six months, for in September 1849 Caroline suddenly died, leaving her daughter stranded between stepparents one of whom was a shrew and the other a virtual stranger. What happened then is open to conjecture. The most plausible scenario has it that she learned the flower business from Deschamps's sister and through some untold sequence of events fell in with painters whom Zola cultivated.

Alexandrine and Zola were undoubtedly a match, but it seems that affection rather than physical passion was what bound them together. Having eluded old maidenhood, Alexandrine, who wanted family more than anything, found Zola to be someone worthy of her resourcefulness, her domestic skill, her energy, her loyal nature. In Alexandrine, Zola found, among other things, the manager on whom he could count to help him save his rich imagination for literature and father books instead of spending himself in unprofitable escapades. Fascinated by lowlife, he stopped his ears to its siren call in choosing as his companion a woman rather like his mother, and, indeed, Madame Zola, relieved perhaps that Alexandrine was not another Berthe, apparently gave her her blessings from the first. Both had grown up poor in the same neighborhood. Both attained higher station through intellectually gifted men. And together they would dote upon "Mimi" as mothers upon a beloved manchild, fretting over his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ailments, satisfying his robust appetite, bolstering his precarious self-esteem, and espousing his causes. Along with Zola's trinity of friends went this *ménage à trois*, which reconstituted the matriarchal household he had known in Aix-en-Provence.

There was now a livelihood to be earned for three. One source of income dried up midway through December 1865, when *Le Salut Public* informed Zola that its clientele could not tolerate long articles. Silenced, he returned three months later in a humbler role, but meanwhile Hippolyte de Villemessant kept him busy by hiring him to write a regular column for *L'Evénement*.

To associate with Hippolyte de Villemessant was to experience the daily brouhaha that surrounded a man whom contemporaries dubbed the Barnum of French journalism. Jovial and munificent, this ex-ribbon merchant from Blois made himself at home in the fourth estate, where he first rose to prominence as a royalist during the Second Republic. Abusive rhetoric cost him several positions, but Louis-Napoleon's *coup d'état*, which ushered in even stricter censorship, unexpectedly worked to his advantage. While the autocratic regime denied him political expression, it let him say what he would about café society, and "le Boulevard" was a gold mine Villemessant exploited with phenomenal success in *Le Figaro* when that defunct weekly came alive under his management. Among disenfranchised Parisians, society gossip helped to satisfy a craving for bread and circuses. "[*Le Figaro* figured as] the great official intelligencer of Parisian scandals, listening at doors, winkling out secrets, whispering indiscretions, telling the uppercrust all about the demi-monde, giving backstage intrigues the importance normally accorded political events, and thus wasting on foolishness energy that might have gone into serious thought," wrote one nineteenth-century critic. Duels and libel suits became regular occurrences as Villemessant, who broke new ground in the realm of defamation, often ventured too far. But from every such contretemps he emerged wealthier and more eager to pry behind respectable facades. At *Le Figaro* it did not much matter whether someone stood on the far Right or the far Left provided he stood outside the pale, and abetting Villemessant were writers chosen for their high color rather than their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ideological hue. Himself a consummate opportunist, he favored militants, people goaded by *bêtes noires*, angry young men like Henri Rochefort and Jules Vallès, both of whom would, in due course, consecrate their polemical talent to the Paris Commune and suffer exile.

Having staked out the suburbs of political discourse, Villemessant multiplied there in publications such as *Le Figaro-Programme*, *La Gazette de Paris*, *Le Grand Journal*, *La Gazette Rose*, *L'Autographe*. This little empire did not include a daily, however, and by 1865 it had become apparent that unless he created one to sell cheap, *Le Petit Journal* would gobble up the mass market. Hence *L'Evénement*, whose first issue appeared in November 1865 with bombastic self-acclaim. "Our phalanx will rejoice as popular writers, or tyros in a fair way to achieving that status, swell its ranks," it declared.

Tyros were paid handsomely, but Villemessant demanded his money's worth. Between February and November, when the government banned *L'Evénement* for having dared to broach an issue outside its licensed subject matter, Zola wrote one hundred and ten articles under the rubric of "Livres d'aujourd'hui et de demain." After only one week on the job he excited controversy with the following manifesto:

> No longer will I force myself to read through a book that irks me for the sole purpose of advising the public not to read it. I'm not sure how many people realize what is involved in the grueling task I've assigned myself. I read an average of three or four volumes a day and until now have read the good and the bad alike, so as not to speak about a work on slight acquaintance. . . . Henceforth, when a book falls from my hands after the tenth page, I won't feel obliged to persevere. It will have been judged . . . and I shall merely announce its existence to my readers. Accordingly, I shall, if necessary, add an appendix to my articles, entitled: "Books not to read."

It was all he could do to remain current as new titles arrived *pêle-mêle*, and even those that escaped outright execution were given short shrift. "I beg readers to observe that my articles are merely conclusions," he explained. "I read the work, I discuss it with myself, and, since I have very little space, I can present only the verdict, not the pleas—whence a certain stiffness or dryness perhaps. . . ." Zola hurried them through

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

three by three, rendering justice with an anecdote, a catchy phrase, a personal reminiscence, a quote. Important works made him pause, notably Victor Hugo's *Travailleurs de la Mer*, but for every such *livre de demain* there were dozens of *livres d'aujourd'hui* and these ephemera included popular biographies, travel literature, novels, criticism, books on homeopathic medicine, on cosmetics used in ancient Rome, on creatures of the deep. Much taken with his virtuoso performance, he would occasionally interrupt it to point out that it involved risks, or to assure the public that what he sought was truth at any cost rather than mere notoriety. "It seems that telling the truth in the world of letters is called uncouthness and discourtesy," he boasted, like Molière's misanthrope.

> I am accused of not having those benevolent sentiments that should prevail in relationships among practitioners of the same trade. . . . People marvel at my candor and free speech as if they were monstrous aberrations; they tell me that I've gone astray and stand to make numerous enemies who will harm me later on. . . . Well, so be it. I am one who believes that highways are more direct than pathways and I shall continue to follow my own road, walking in sunlight, speaking out loud, as I believe I must.

As characteristic of him as the aggressiveness he demonstrated in print was the need he felt to legitimize the thrill of it with protestations of virtuous self-sacrifice, which suggests that stage fright threatened him even when he addressed an invisible audience.

Anyone who read "Livres d'aujourd'hui et de demain" beyond week one would soon have mastered Zola's critical vocabulary. "Harsh," "violent," "analytical," "feverish" were compliments and, strung together, they made his case for a literature that featured what he liked to call "the human beast," meaning the primitive self held in strict quarantine by most novelists of the day. "I am sympathetic to these violent stories, when they spring from psychological and physiological analysis," he wrote of a novel entitled *Un Assassin*. "The massacres committed by Ponson du Terrail's Rocambole make me laugh; they are puppet plays and I can see bran and wool oozing out of bullet holes. But show me the human beast in all its fury and I quake. Here blood flows, real blood.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

. . . The writer, through careful observation and authentic detail, brings his characters alive." Against well-bred fiction and history, Zola armed himself with a perverse credo according to which everything proper concealed impropriety and everyone famous some secret infamy. "I like historical indiscretions and nothing delights me more than the little facts of history, those that engender the big ones. Historians who solemnly record them neglect to lift the veil completely so that we see the stage without seeing the wings." But this reductionism in no way tempered his enthusiasm for extravaganzas like Hugo's *Travailleurs de la Mer*, where a bigger-than-life protagonist triumphs over nature. Nor, indeed, did one *parti pris* contradict the other. Commuting as he did between sociopathic depths and an imaginative realm that nurtured fantasies of heroic transcendence, Zola found what he sought above or beneath his confrères' pious universe, in the pariahdom to which they consigned the irrational, the singular, the unsightly.

At stake was not only human truth but creative independence. Nothing irked him more than sententiousness and he regularly scolded those who used the novel as a pulpit for some ideological message or homily. Returning fiction to the storyteller became his refrain. "I'm not a disciple of art for art's sake; it's just that I like a novel to be a novel," is how he put it in a review of *Un Divorce*, by Madame Champceix, whose characters shuffle through the plot like men in sandwich boards, with a liberal agenda written all over them. "I would that the novelist told himself above all that he is a physiologist and a psychologist. Drama stops dead when politics or social science is dumped right into the path of action." Not even Hugo escaped scot free, for Zola's tribute had a critical edge to it:

> Personally, I prefer the spectacle of the hero conquering the elements. Here the poet's heart and imagination run free. He no longer preaches, he no longer discusses. He is simply the great painter of human and natural forces. He is an artist pure, and I need not worry about his social theories or philosophical beliefs.

Scornful of himself as versifier, he saw in the novel a "virile" genre and in the manly novelist a demiurge illustrating "hu-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

man and natural forces" or a sleuth uninhibited by moral strictures. Beyond good and evil was where his own future lay and there, on that height, reigned the half-lengendary father he hoped to equal, if not surpass. "Me, I'm a rebel," he announced in the midst of one review. "Ever since I burned my poems (which in fact he hadn't done), I have given myself over to reality with such passion that I can no longer swallow lies, however sweetly rhymed."

Since professions of faith shouted from a swiftly moving vehicle drew no crowds, he decided to go where people flocked and in May they flocked to the annual state exhibition of painting and sculpture held at the Palais de l'Industrie. This capital event, known as the Salon, was a plum that usually fell to seasoned critics who walked blind through the vast bazaar, genuflecting before work signed by eminences of the Academy. Had Villemessant played it safe, he would have hired one such veteran, but the gambler or gadfly in him took over when a mere neophyte applied for the job. Zola, whose shy demeanor belied his pugnacity, got what he wanted, on condition that he use a pseudonym.

The Salon, like many another "bourgeois" institution, had royal origins. Conceived as a solemn occasion for showing art that promoted Louis XIV's cultural hegemony, it was the preserve of academicians during the ancien régime. They alone might exhibit and, indeed, membership in the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture required that they do so, until a jury was set up to limit submissions. The Terror dismantled this order. It declared every artist show-worthy as the Salon became an egalitarian ritual conducted without benefit of jury or academy. "All artists, French or foreign, members or not of the Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture, will be equally admitted to exhibit their work in that part of the Louvre assigned for that purpose," ran one decree. Havoc wrought in institutional life did not, however, diminish the authority of the ancients. When Louis XVI fell, classical models survived intact and under Jacques Louis David's dictatorship continued to hold sway.

An anachronistic backdrop used by regicides as well as kings readily found employment in nineteenth-century France, with the Ecole des Beaux-Arts grooming artists from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whom the newly enriched and the precariously empowered could commission images that bespoke permanence. Taught to look backward, this establishment made modern life unwelcome at the Salon where every spring brought forth lifeless verdure and where, behind a coat of varnish, scenes from the Bible or Greek and Roman mythology or France's heroic past recurred year after year. As society became more mobile, official art became more sclerotic. Still, the modern world succeeded inch by inch in wedging itself through the temple gates. First to enter was Delacroix, of whom Théophile Gautier wrote in 1841 that "the future of painting is being realized on his canvases; he is the true child of this century and . . . every piece of contemporary poetry has cast its shadow on his palette." Along with him came the Barbizon school, whose belief that nature should be rendered in its very midst produced art obnoxious to classical landscapists. Corot and Daubigny met stubborn opposition from the Salon jury during Louis-Philippe's reign. Twenty years later they themselves were jurors casting votes for Gustave Courbet.

The history of protest against a state apparatus that held imaginative work hostage to certain pictorial conventions included one-man shows the most dramatic of which had taken place at the 1855 World's Fair. There, in full view, Courbet built a private pavilion and exhibited masterpieces spurned by the Salon, charging people admission and issuing a catalogue that expounded his credo. "I have wanted quite simply to draw from the total knowledge of tradition and the reasoned and independent sentiment of my own individuality," it read in part. "To know so as to have the power: that was my thought. To be in a position to translate the manners, the ideas, the look of my age, according to my own lights; to be not only a painter but a man as well; in a word, to create living art—that has been my aim."

No one dared imitate him, not right away that is, for beyond the Salon lay a frontier where private galleries were still anomalous, where critics seldom ventured, and where the average patron, who regarded official consecration as a warranty of talent, felt quite lost. How matters stood became clear eight years after Courbet's fiasco, when Napoleon III, in a quixotic gesture that served to dampen the spirit of revolt by

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sponsoring failure itself, let rejected candidates exhibit their work at a "Salon des Refusés." Many accepted the invitation, though they understood it would earn them public ridicule, and among these so-called "refusés" were not only the numerous drudges of art but also Pissarro, Fantin-Latour, Whistler, Manet (with *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*). Any exposure was, they felt, better than proud obscurity. They also needed clients.

Officialdom having prevailed upon Louis-Napoleon to refrain from further intervention, the Salon des Refusés of 1863 became a precedent invoked by disgruntled artists in their struggle against state censorship. One such artist was Paul Cézanne, who, with characteristic effrontery, laid his case before the Superintendent of Fine Arts, Count de Nieuwerkerke. "I have lately had the honor of writing to you about two canvases the jury has just refused," he protested in a letter dated April 19, 1866.

> Since you have not yet answered, I feel compelled to dwell further on the motives that made me write it. As you have certainly received my letter, I need not repeat the arguments presented therein. I shall merely reiterate that I cannot accept the illegitimate judgment of confrères whom I myself have not entrusted with the mission of appraising my worth. I call upon you to support my demand. I wish to appeal directly to the public and exhibit nevertheless. I see nothing exorbitant in this wish, and if you questioned painters in my position, all would answer by repudiating the Jury and telling you that they want to participate one way or another in an exhibition which must, perforce, remain open to every serious worker.
>
> May the Salon des Refusés therefore be reestablished. I would ardently wish to show my work, even if I were the lone exhibitor, in order that the crowd should know that I have no more desire to be confused with those gentlemen of the Jury than they apparently have to be confused with me.

The same day Cézanne hoisted this petard, which had been formulated with Zola's help, Zola himself published a piece in *L'Evénement* entitled "Un Suicide," under the pseudonym he was presently to adopt for his Salon articles—Claude. Calling attention to a painter of small repute named Jules Holtzapfel, who had shot himself after being rejected by the Jury, it im-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

plied that juries inflicted capital punishment. "I wanted to see where the unhappy man committed suicide; I found out the address of his studio and have just now emerged from that sinister room, whose floor still shows large reddish spots," he wrote. "It gives me bitter satisfaction to note, even as I undertake my review of the Salon, that I have run smack against a tomb. I am thinking about those who will enjoy the crowd's applause, those whose works will be amply displayed in full light, and I see at the same time this poor man in his forlorn studio writing adieux and spending a whole night preparing himself for death."

Zola thus put readers on notice that he intended to avenge those whose art had been excluded from the Salon and indeed his first articles, which appeared before the vernissage, constitute an indictment of the jury system. "Nowadays a Salon is not the work of artists, it is the work of a Jury. . . . [The Jury] has created these long galleries, cold and livid, where a harsh light reveals all manner of timid nonentities and stolen reputations." His image of the Salon with its *tableaux morts* clearly foreshadows his portrayal, in *Thérèse Raquin*, of the morgue with its "livid" bodies aligned on marble slabs, which is to say that even as Paris began primping for a gala, Zola got dressed for a wake, or an excursion through some netherworld guarded by spirits who would sooner kill than admit color, light, and movement."They mock truth and justice," he declared. "All-powerful, they show only the third or fourth part of what really exists; they amputate art and offer the crowd its mutilated corpse."

Since Zola habitually posed as a sacrificial victim, it would seem that the morbid eloquence he unleashed against the Salon jury had its source in hatred of juries past. At issue was an injustice done not only to artists whose place had been taken by men with "stolen reputations" but to children robbed of their inheritance. Rescuing them from oblivion meant rescuing himself, and nothing illustrates this equation more pointedly than a campaign he waged two years later in Aix's newspaper, *Le Mémorial d'Aix*, when much ink was spilt over the question of that city having forgotten François Zola. "If the future treats me generously, if it amplifies my voice, the first cry I utter will be one of indignation against you. Then, in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my own work, will my father have his name brilliantly enshrined," he prophesied. Such altruistic boasts let him swagger without incurring divine wrath. Ambitious of fame, Zola, who always feared that lightning would strike him dead, could not assert himself except in a crusade for the derelict or exiled or anonymous, and it is remarkable how often he launched enterprises from beyond some grave. Just as Jules Holtzapfel's suicide inaugurates the Salon, so the first novel of the *Rougon-Macquart* opens in a cemetery whose tenants had been dug up and carted away. To keep the dead alive was to keep alive the self-righteous anger that generated energy for writing.

His gorge might have risen even higher had he seen a memorandum written before the Salon des Refusés in which Napoleon III's administration fretted about "déclassés" seriously endangering society unless "a dike" were built to contain "so many individualities." But experience as a déclassé had familiarized him with the bugbears of officialdom, and his own rhetoric shows it. "I hold that a work of art is . . . a personality, an individuality," he wrote after dispatching the Jury.

> What I ask of an artist is not that he give me tender visions or frightful nightmares but that he boldly assert a powerful and idiosyncratic mind, a nature that grasps the natural world and sets it plunk before our eyes. . . . In short, I feel complete disdain for minor dexterities, for self-seeking blandishments, for what study has taught an artist and what dogged application has made routine, for all the theatrical stunts in history painting pulled off by this chap and all the perfumed daydreams of that one. But I have complete admiration for work that leaps spontaneously from a vigorous and singular hand. Here it is no longer a matter of pleasing or displeasing; it is a matter of being oneself, of baring one's heart, of energetically formulating an individuality.

His title for this credo, "Le Moment Artistique," informed the reader that he was, if not a hard-core positivist, a loyal fellow traveler. With the memory of failed baccalaureate examinations still rankling, Zola set out to wipe his slate clean. Against academic dogma he invoked natural science and let loose a barrage of metaphors calculated to make the prudish cringe. "Do you fear your own language that you toil so arduously

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over dead ones?" he sneered. "Art is a human product, a human secretion; it is our body that sweats the beauty of our works. Our body changes according to climate and custom, and secretions change likewise." Taine's influence is manifest here, but in divorcing mind from creativity, or in treating it as a mere receptacle for the pieties and prescriptions of schoolmen who swore by history painting, Zola went beyond his mentor. To create, he implied, was to behold a virgin world through uncouth eyes. To *be* was to exorcise despotic ghosts.

Villemessant soon understood that his protégé meant to exorcise the Salon itself. Where other critics saw images, Zola saw "dismal nullity," and when at last someone worthy of recognition did materialize, it proved to be an artist with nothing on exhibit in 1866. "I liked him right away; since we first met, I've penetrated his talent," he stated in a piece devoted to Edouard Manet, whose *Olympia* had scandalized Paris the year before. "What certain confrères pass off as a depiction of nature impelled him, no doubt, to question reality on his own. He apparently rejected all the knowledge and experience of previous generations; he wanted to begin at the beginning, that is, to develop art from close observation of his material." The heroic truth seeker found himself ostracized by subservient fantasists:

> You know what effect Monsieur Manet's canvases produce at the Salon. They punch holes in the wall. Spread all around them are the wares of fashionable confectioners—sugarcane trees and pie-crust houses, gingerbread gents and whipped-cream ladies.

Like his characterization of realism as a clear window on life, Zola's image of holes punched in the wall assigns a virile function to the eye. Some eyes penetrate while some decorate. Some engage in child's play, some do yeoman work. Some devour flesh and some feast on pâtisserie (the stomach being yet another locus of virility for Zola, who ate with passion when he was not dyspeptic). "Monsieur Manet has a no-nonsense temperament, which cuts clean," he wrote. "He captures his figures alive, he does not shrink before nature's rowdiness, he lets objects assert themselves, detaching each

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from every other. His entire being compels him to see . . . in simple and energetic swatches. It could be said of him that he is satisfied to find the right tones and the right arrangement of them. What results is a strong, solid painting." Lest anyone so inclined tell himself that a man unconventional in his art must be immature in his way of life, Zola portrayed Manet as irreproachably bourgeois. "The waggish scapegrace imagined by the crowd . . . is married and leads the orderly life of a bourgeois. Furthermore, he works without respite, always searching, studying nature, posing questions, and following his own path."

Manliness or "temperament" signified high praise from Zola (as from Cézanne). The word allowed him more freedom of movement than "realism," which felt too much like a straitjacket tailored by color-blind ideologues. And it let him attack officialdom low down, where he hoped a blow might cripple its authority. "Now there's a temperament, there's a man among eunuchs!" was how he introduced Claude Monet, whose *Camille* had somehow survived the otherwise efficient triage. "Glance at canvases all around it and you will see the pitiful show they make next to this window opened on nature. Here we have something more than a realist; we have a strong, subtle interpreter who has not gone wooden with his concern for detail." Did society's rulers pretend to lord it over Creation! Their artistic offspring were born sterile. Did a dynastic bourgeoisie glorying in lines of succession urge itself on posterity? Posterity would heed men endowed with nothing but temperament, or the disinherited among whom Zola stood as fellow plaintiff. "I have tried to restore M. Manet the place he owns, right up front," he declared. "People will perhaps mock the panegyrist as loudly as the painter. One day we will both be avenged. An eternal truth sustains me in my critical mission, which is that temperaments alone live and alone dominate the ages. It is impossible—impossible, mind you—that M. Manet not enjoy his day of triumph sooner or later, that he not crush the timid mediocrities who surround him."

Zola's view ultimately prevailed against academic fashion of course, but in 1866 it took courage to thrash the Jury and real discernment to single out Manet, Monet, and Pissarro.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jurors waxed wroth. Denunciatory letters flooded *L'Evénement*. "Lunatics tore up the paper in front of kiosks on the Boulevard," wrote Paul Alexis, and with one such lunatic Zola nearly fought a duel. Although Villemessant thrived on ballyhoo so much of it was more than he had bargained for. Readers began cancelling their subscriptions *en masse*, which prompted the publisher to muzzle his ferocious pup after three weeks. In a valedictory entitled "Adieux d'un critique d'art," Zola held nothing back. "I don't give a hoot about the French school!" he exclaimed.

> Me, I don't have any traditions; I don't discuss the fold of drapes, the attitude of limbs, the expression on faces. I don't grasp what people mean by a fault or a quality. I believe that a master's work is a coherent whole, the utterance of his heart and flesh. You can't change anything; you can only acknowledge genius and study it.

His exit line came next, and it sounded a note of truculent martyrdom. "I will always be on the side of the vanquished. There is open conflict between indomitable temperaments and the crowd. I am for temperaments, and I attack the crowd."

As bracing as he found the public outcry, applause from kindred spirits gave him greater satisfaction. Manet, for one, lost no time communicating his gratitude. Mutual friends had brought them together earlier that year, when *The Fifer* and *The Tragic Actor* were yet to be rejected by the Jury. But until his Salon article appeared, Zola was, for Manet, a half-remembered face in the regular parade of late afternoon visitors who trooped through the artist's studio near Clichy. Only now, with Zola having shown his mettle, did they become fast friends. "Dear Monsieur Zola," Manet wrote on May 7th. "I don't know where to find you so that I can shake your hand and tell you how happy and proud I am to be defended by a man of your talent. What a splendid article. Many, many thanks. Your previous piece ("Le Moment Artistique") was altogether remarkable and made a splash. I would like your opinion on some matter. Where can we meet? If it doesn't inconvenience you, I'm at the Café de Bade every day between 5:30 and 7:00."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Most people were either charmed or vexed by Manet, the son of a prominent magistrate, whose demeanor offered no obvious clue to his artistic iconoclasm. At home in café society, he gravitated toward fashionable resorts along the Boulevard des Italiens where Zola, had their paths crossed, might have taken him for a typical Second Empire dandy idling life away. His banter, his manners, his wardrobe all bespoke privilege and with it went an air of jaunty self-confidence. "One evening I was walking down rue Pigalle when I saw approaching me a man of youthful appearance and distinguished carriage, dressed with elegant simplicity," recalled Georges Jeanniot. "A blond wearing a fine silky beard, he had grey eyes, a straight nose, mobile nostrils, gloved hands, alert and nervous feet. It was Manet." The nonchalance of the gentleman expressed itself otherwise in his aversion to theoretical debate. Those who knew him as a voluble and witty conversationalist could not easily draw him out on the subject of art. "Art is a circle," he would say. "One is born inside it or not, by happenstance."

That Manet sometimes wondered whether he himself belonged inside it or not may be inferred from Mallarmé's portrait of him lunging helter-skelter at the blank canvas, "as if he had never painted before." This apparently seamless figure was in fact a curious patchwork. Bold yet insecure, well-bred but given to affecting the drawl of street Arabs, modernist and producing art fraught with quotations from Titian, Goya, Ingres, Velasquez, etc., he could neither follow the beaten path nor cease to value trophies society reserved for its pious sons. What Erik Satie once said about Ravel—"No matter that he spurns the Legion of Honor: his music accepts it"—would apply to Manet in reverse. Though his work violated every canon upheld by officialdom, he wanted a tricolor rosette all the same. "Anything that distinguishes one from the multitude is legitimate. . . . In this dog's life we lead, full of struggle, one can never be sufficiently well armed," he declared after Degas had done ridiculing some artist friend who made the honors list. Irony deserted him when recognition or a lack of it came into play. "It's no news to me how very bourgeois you are," rejoined Degas.

Degas knew full well that Manet wore many hats and wore

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them all as he travelled from his flat to his studio to "Le Boulevard," then home again. A plump, maternal Dutchwoman named Suzanne Leenhof, who bore him a son before they married in 1863, stood at either end of this itinerary, orienting her peripatetic spouse without hindering his movements. She was, so to speak, the ballast he carried on his daily flight into playland. "[Manet] has admitted to me that he adores café society and deep-down takes sensual delight in the perfumed and luminous refinements of its night life," wrote Zola. "No doubt he is drawn to it by its broad and vivid color." But magnetic attraction worked both ways. Drawn to *le monde*, Manet in turn became a cynosure for young men like Fantin-Latour, for confrères waffling between the old and the new, writers eking out a bare livelihood in the service of realism, financiers, theatrical impresarios, stray cocottes, notorious horizontals. People paid him impromptu visits, and at 5:30 P.M., when he did not appear all spruced up at the Café de Bade, he was often to be found at his studio entertaining a strange omnium gatherum, which Zola made even stranger.

Certainly Manet and Zola had wider grounds for friendship than the transaction that gave one a visible platform and the other a polemical voice. Soloists by nature, both men were jealous of their independence, and what Zola wrote about schools, implicitly justifying the distance he kept from literary ideologues, struck a sympathetic chord in Manet, who would snub the Impressionist exhibition organized several years later. To challenge dogma did not mean that either of them wished to plight his troth with a marginal heresy or to deny himself institutional insignias. Enamored of Paris, they sought to conquer it after the fashion of Balzac's Rastignac, and Manet hounding the Salon for recognition prefigured Zola obstinately campaigning for a seat in the Académie Française. Center stage held them spellbound. "It's criminal to live far from Paris in these times of fever and struggle," Zola exulted in a letter to a fellow southerner.

His life shifted increasingly toward the Right Bank now that he saw more and more of painters who inhabited Les Batignolles, a hilly neighborhood near Montmartre which had been farmland in Napoleon I's day. Linked to downtown Paris by omnibuses called "Batignollaises," this urban village,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where cottages survived among recently built tenements, became home for people needing cheap digs or wanting asylum from revolutionary turmoil. Its population swelled after 1848 and continued to swell under Napoleon III, when the widespread demolition of slums cast thousands adrift. Pensioned civil servants, retired shopkeepers, down-at-heel spinsters, and unemployed workers made do in an environment that also proved hospitable to young artists. Manet lived on the rue de Saint-Petersbourg (later renamed Leningrad). Within hailing distance of him were Bazille, Sisley, Renoir, and Degas.

The following year Zola as well found quarters in Les Batignolles. Meanwhile he showed up almost every week at a café just off the Place de Clichy where he was sure to find his painter friends assembled, especially on Friday afternoons, when they met in plenary session, knowing that Manet would join them. Until Manet "discovered" it, nothing distinguished the Café Guerbois from any other such establishment, save its trellised garden. Most habitués came for sport, and billiard balls colliding on tables in a dimly-lit back room echoed through the saloon, which had mirrors and gingerbread to remind Manet of his beloved Boulevard. Here he matched wits with Degas while neighborhood folk perplexed by their conversation looked sideways at what they called "the artists' corner." It was a lively scene, if not bohemian in the tradition of the Café Momus. "Nothing could have been more interesting than these talks, with their perpetual clashes of opinion," Monet reminisced some years later. "You kept your mind on the alert, you felt encouraged to do disinterested, sincere research, you laid in supplies of enthusiasm that kept you going for weeks and weeks, until a project you had in mind took definite form. You always left the café feeling hardened for the struggle, with a stronger will, a sharpened purpose, and a clearer head." Consorting with porcupines like Degas and Duranty (a talented novelist who wrote art criticism) sometimes led to egos being punctured, but Monet's enthusiasm was generally shared and as word of this cénacle spread, the few became more numerous. Alfred Stevens, Nadar, Whistler all put in occasional appearances.

Zola seldom encountered Cézanne at the Guerbois. When

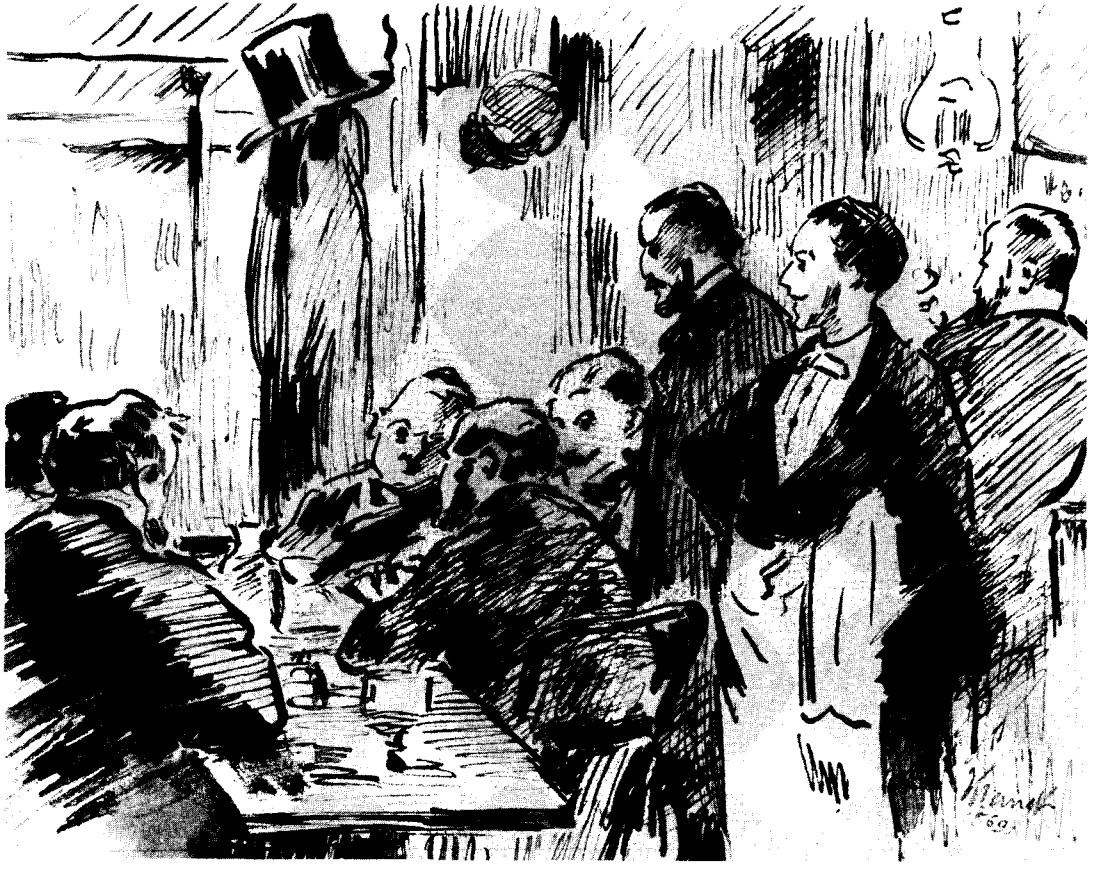
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Paul did go there, he would arrive late, survey everyone warily, open his jacket, hitch up his pants like a cocksure street tough, then shake hands all around, except with Manet, to whom he'd doff his cap and say, in the nasal twang of Provence: "I won't offer you my hand, Monsieur Manet, as it's been one week now since I've bathed." Torn between the need for companionship and an aversion to company that made him feel stupid, he often sat tight-lipped, shunning the mêlée. More often than not, his departure followed hard on his arrival. A queer look or a remark critical of some idea he cherished was a spark to tinder and enough to propel him from the café without explanation. "They're a bunch of bastards, they dress as smartly as solicitors," he told Antoine Guillement. "Wit bores me shitless (*l'esprit m'emmerde*)."

Around the adolescent whose letters from Aix indicate how much in fact he loved wit, Cézanne had fabricated a caricature of oafishness, relying on this persona to defend him. Terror-ridden, he found shelter behind the thicket of an unkempt beard and in the depths of a huge, brown overcoat, which turned green with age. Mortified by his body, he dressed as a scarecrow, flung obscenities at the world, and, wherever he set up house, wallowed in debris. "Last winter's ashes were still heaped in front of the stove," Zola wrote in *L'Oeuvre*. "Apart from the bed, the little washstand and the divan, the only big pieces of furniture in the place were a dilapidated oak wardrobe and a huge deal table littered with brushes, tubes of paint, unwashed crockery, and a spirit stove crowned with a saucepan still dirty after being used for cooking noodles. The rest was a weird collection of battered old chairs and broken-down easels." Few people penetrated his redoubt, especially when despair held him fast, and models who came, never came back. Indeed, the mess, like his scatological bluster, seemed calculated to prove that for women he could only be an object of revulsion or alarm. "I don't need a woman of my own," he protested. "She would complicate life. I don't even know what good it would do, and anyway I've always been afraid of trying."

But such behavior served, above all, to help him feel more substantial as he shuttled beggarlike between Aix and Paris. It also helped him vent anger accumulated since early child-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Edouard Manet
A CAFE INTERIOR (1869)
India ink on pale tan paper

Courtesy: The Harvard University Art Museums (Fogg Art Museum), bequest of Meta and Paul J. Sachs

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hood. For everything we know about him suggests that the artist who requested a Salon des Refusés from De Nieuwerkerke spoke on behalf of the son who had come into this world misbegotten. Cézanne could hardly keep them apart under any circumstances, least of all when up against paternal authority. Wanting approval yet inviting ostracism, he was, in the lifelong quarrel that yoked him to his rich father, by turns a bastard demanding his birthright and an heir flaunting the stigmata of illegitimate birth.

Rootless in Paris, Paul counted on a potluck dinner at Zola's flat every Thursday evening. And so, with equal enthusiasm, did Zola, of whom one acquaintance observed that he, like his freemason father, had a predilection for secret societies, mysterious covenants, bonds unsuspected by the profane. While defining himself vis-à-vis Aix as a refugee from limbo, he addressed Paris as someone whose homeland was his inner refuge. Sneering at his provincial past did not prevent him from idealizing the memory of it. "Happy those with memories!" he exclaimed in *Mon Salon*, a pamphlet dedicated to Cézanne, which included the articles he had written for *L'Evénement*.

> I feel profound joy, my friend, in chatting privately with you. You wouldn't believe how I suffered during this quarrel I've just had with the crowd, with unknown people. I felt so misunderstood, I sensed so much hatred around me that I often let my pen drop in discouragement. But today I can offer myself the intimate satisfaction of resuming our ten-year-old conversation. What follows was written for you alone; I know that you will read it with your heart and that tomorrow you will love me all the more. Imagine us in some hidden culvert far from human strife: old friends who know each other to the core and communicate with mere glances. . . . I see you throughout my life as the pale boy Musset speaks about. You are my entire youth; I find you bound up with everything I've ever experienced of pain and pleasure. Our minds, fraternally united, grew side by side. . . .

His preface let it be known that his work constituted a rumination *à deux* overheard by third parties, rather than an exercise in publicity mongering. Through Cézanne, he conferred the virtue of inwardness on articles born to provoke outrage or fetch applause. But this somewhat disingenuous manifesto

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was not without a basis in reality, for Zola disdained the Paris "scene," rarely lingering at *L'Evénement* and avoiding cafés where fellow writers liked to congregate. "I am surrounded by painters, I don't have a single literary conversationalist," he informed Valabrègue on February 19, 1867. His competitive nature would always make him wary. And hand in hand with competitiveness went a fear of exposure or humiliation from which he found relief at home, among Aixois whom he had known since childhood. Cézanne, Baille, Valabrègue, Marius Roux, Philippe Solari were not just friends. They were family.

When July came, the clan, including Alexandrine, set up summer quarters in Gloton near Bennecourt, a village of yellow-washed houses situated on a grassy bank of the Seine several miles upstream from Giverny. There, for three or four weeks, Zola brought himself to suspend his curriculum vitae. "I feel like an atom in the bosom of vast nature and want only to lose myself there, to surrender to these waters and clouds, to plunge into the well of this silence, . . . no longer nagged by doubt." Under a changeable Norman sky, the countryside rolled northward toward the valley of the Epte, and within easy walking distance was Tripleval, where the Seine ended its loop through great limestone bluffs reminiscent of the Provençal garrigue. These inveterate hikers seldom moved except by rowboat, however. They spent their days swimming, fishing, or picknicking on thickly wooded islands, and, entranced by the Seine, took advantage of moonlight to glide among the water lilies. A blacksmith at his anvil woke them even before the morning Angelus tolled. They, in turn, kept villagers up past their usual bedtime with discussions that became strident when, as often happened, one "ism" grated against another. Presumably the racket they made was not intolerable, for Père Dumont, who let rooms over his grocery store, welcomed them back in 1867 and again in 1868.

Although Zola had travelled quite some distance since January, hectoring him all the way were doubts which the therapeutic influence of nature could not banish. He would travel much further, and doubt remained his faithful companion throughout the journey. "He is as ambitious and domineering

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the intellectual realm as he is soft and conciliatory in every other," Paul Alexis wrote fifteen years later. "He yields points grudgingly and never on the spot. Not being right causes him intense pain. So deeply rooted is this rivalrous spirit that it will seize the most trivial pretext to manifest itself. Thus, I have sometimes played chess with him and won. He confesses that, momentarily, his defeat irks him as much as if someone denied him literary talent." Any setback mobilized the specter of impotence, but Zola turned victory itself into defeat by impugning his own achievement. The latter gave him little comfort, and so matters stood in 1866, during that bucolic interlude at Bennecourt-Gloton. What he saw, in taking stock of himself, was not so much a young man on the rise as a climber about to fall, who would fall very hard indeed if he paused to rest or look backward. "I am impatient, I mean to advance more quickly," he confided to a friend on July 26th, soon after returning from vacation. "You can't imagine how subject one is to sudden spells of lassitude in the harsh métier I practise. I must produce almost an article a day. I must read, or at least riffle through, the works of every contemporary imbecile. I rest only by working a little at my own books." It was his deep-rooted conviction that he would lose his ability to write unless he wrote without respite, that his gift could, like his father, disappear at any moment. Two days away from his desk made him anxious, noted Alexis. "After one week, he'd writhe."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LOUIS SIMPSON

The Poet's Theme[1]

I. The Poet's Theme

Proust said that poetry originates in a room "shuttered and sealed against all traffic with the outer world, the poet's soul." I think this is true and that the poet who invites the world into the room of the private self soon ceases to have any self to speak of. The world, being ungrateful, will turn to some other whose writing has the power of solitary thought, so that it may barge into that room too and send thought flying.

But we are not the world—we love poetry and wish to understand it. Our being here to speak of poetry shows that the need to understand is as strong as the need to create, and it seems to be so with poets, even those who are skeptical of literary criticism. Poets are critics in spite of themselves. Wordsworth was a critic; every good writer is necessarily a critic, otherwise he or she would write bathos instead of tragedy, instead of comedy bad jokes. To read the odes of Keats, for example, is to be aware that with every line he had to be a critic; there are gulfs of poor logic and bad taste to each side of every step he takes. (Some readers have fallen into those gulfs on his behalf. I recall one who quoted the famous lines from the "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

> Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
> Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
> 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

[1]This essay was originally given as a series of lectures called the Dancy Lectures, delivered at the University of Montevallo, Montevallo, Alabama, on March 18, 19, and 20, 1986.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He said these lines were to be interpreted as the poet's saying to the urn, "That is all you need to know because you're only an urn." The important difference is not between the mind that creates and the mind that criticizes, but between intelligence and stupidity.)

If poets are critics, readers are justified in being critics too and venturing into the shuttered room. But once we are in, what can we expect to find and what are we to do?

"In the first place," a poet once remarked, "it is necessary to be a poet." This is what we are given: the poet, a man or woman with a peculiar constitution. Poets are born, as the saying has it, and it is no use asking why. They are born with a talent that will issue as writing, and this writing will be of a special kind, in the heightened rhythm of verse. (I am using the word "poet" in the sense the world uses it, meaning a writer of verse, rather than in the general, Shelleyan sense of one who "expresses imagination.")

The act of creation cannot be explained, but we would like to understand, and so we approach as close as we can. A common approach is to find out all one can about the life of the poet. In recent years there has been a vogue of biographies dealing with the lives of poets—Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz, John Berryman. Proust had something to say about the genre:

> Sainte-Beuve came to set up that celebrated Method which, according to Taine, Bourget, and the rest of them, is his title to fame, and which consists, if you would understand a poet or a writer, in greedily catechising those who knew him, who saw quite a lot of him, who can tell us how he conducted himself in regard to women, etc.
>
> "The Method of Sainte-Beuve"

Proust remarks that this kind of biographical writing touches on every point where the poet's "true self" is not involved.

But the "true self"—these are my words, not his—is the product of a life lived in a certain way. The mind that creates is the mind of a temperament with a personal history. "Fiction," Joseph Conrad observed, "appeals to temperament," and that which appeals is the temperament of the writer: "The artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal." If Proust is right, poetry is not an expression of the everyday, shoelace-tying life of the poet. On the other hand, if Conrad is right, poetry is an expression of temperament. Therefore it appears that poetry has to be both personal and impersonal, both an expression of the individual and of a community.

Wordsworth describes the poet as one who has extraordinary imagination and power of expressing what he or she imagines. "But," he adds, "these passions and thoughts are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men." But this does not explain how the imagination of the poet is translated into general passions, thoughts, and feelings. This is what I wish to consider: how the life of the poet becomes imagination and is turned into poetry—how fact is changed into fiction.

The mind that writes is not the ordinary mind—the "I" of the poem, as Rimbaud said, "is another." And the life that appears in the poem is not the ordinary life of the poet—it has been changed so that it connects with other lives. Yeats speaks of this in "Sailing to Byzantium." The speaker of the poem has grown old in a place where "Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long / Whatever is begotten, born, and dies," and he wishes to escape his mortality. So he has set sail for Byzantium, the city of art.

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Yeats deliberately gathered ideas that would enable him to write. Out of occult lore and magic of various sorts he gathered a philosophy, and he envisioned himself as the descendant of hard-riding, independent-minded country gentlemen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

These views of himself gave him the confidence and the authority, the voice, that is distinctively his—gave him his style. It can be a grand style, rather too grand for some tastes, but the point is that it bridged the gap between the merely personal life and the poetry—it enabled him to write. He found the terms that would appeal to the passions, thoughts and feelings of an audience. Or that at least would be clear and recognizable . . . for we do not have to agree with the terms of a poet's thought—we have only to understand them. We don't read Dante because we are Catholics but because he is a poet. It is possible to disagree with the ideas in a poem and yet feel its force as drama.

Poets may not be as deliberate as Yeats in gathering ideas and adopting an attitude that will enable them to write—his is an extraordinary case. But even a poet as natural and unaffected as Keats is quite aware that he is, or is going to be, a poet, and must shape his thinking to this end. Keats imagines himself as one having "negative capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." The idea Keats has of his character as a poet enables him to write the odes. The odes show us a character that is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without grasping at philosophy or, on the other hand, losing itself in confusion, though at times it comes pretty close.

The style is the man. Yes, and woman too—but not directly. Style reflects the thought of the man or woman. Poets put their thought into imagery that appeals to the senses, into engaging sounds and rhythms. In this way their thought is conveyed. "Nothing can be perceived by the mind," said John Locke, "unless it has first been perceived by the senses." Sense-perception is the bridge between the thought of the poet and the mind of the reader. Through *poema*, a made thing, the imagination of the poet appeals to the "general passions and thoughts and feelings" of the audience.

Let us return to the shuttered room. It is not all darkness within. We can see certain outlines of themes being formed . . . by experience, everything the mind has received from childhood to maturity. The poet discovers a theme through a process of living and thinking. The theme is ex-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pressed in writing and so becomes a part of our lives. Literature is the folklore of the educated.

The poetry of Yeats, for example, has several themes. There is the theme of love for a beautiful and unattainable woman, and the theme of a country torn by civil war—a condition that has, nevertheless, a sanctity about it, gained by blood-sacrifice. There is the theme of growing old and how one can fight against it by creating "monuments of unaging intellect." These themes in which the private man speaks to a public audience are what give Yeats's poetry its force.

In order to understand poetry we must read closely—we must understand what the words mean. But it is not possible to understand unless we grasp the ideas lying behind the words, the themes underlying all. We may grope forever from line to line without grasping the real meaning or having a true impression of the whole, not seeing the wood for the trees.

It is a legitimate use of biography to give us the facts we need in order to understand a writer's thought—not in the act of writing, for that cannot be explained, but the steps leading up to it. In the hands of an intelligent author, "critical biography" can be literary criticism of the most persuasive kind, for it is based in fact, not in speculation. Jackson Bate's biography of Samuel Johnson is a model of such writing. Here is Bate on Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes."

> Though *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is a deeply personal utterance, it also embraces tradition and convention, so much so that it might at first seem almost anonymous to readers habituated to Romantic and post-Romantic modes. Loosely based on a satire of Juvenal's, it adopts the closed heroic couplet of Dryden and Pope. The argument itself is a traditional one in religious apologetics, put unforgettably in the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, and in such works, among others, as Augustine's *Confessions*, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, and William Law's *Serious Call*: the complete inability of the world and of worldly life to offer genuine or permanent satisfaction, and our need to turn from this world in order to seek safety and joy in religious faith and in another world.

So Bate explains the theme not only of "The Vanity of Human Wishes," but *Rasselas*, and places it in a great tradition. It

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is not Johnson's theme only, but one that has been expressed through the ages. Bate makes some further observations:

> His poem is formally a satire, but his irony differs essentially from that in most classical or Augustan satiric writing, for it articulates a vision more essentially tragic than comic. In most satire, that is, the irony is in the author, who thus stands above his subject. Frequently in the poem Johnson also adopts this stance. But pervasively through *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, the irony is in the world, in the way of things, and the author is as helpless before it as the persons he writes about. In this respect Johnson is closer to Hardy than to Pope.

This is literary criticism of a high order. The distinction between merely satirical writing and writing that tells an unpalatable truth is one that many readers are unable to grasp. Bate understands Johnson's temperament: Johnson has "less playfulness and wit than Dryden and Pope, but far more meditative weight and power of direct emotion." The observation does not proceed from the critic's fancy but from his knowledge of Johnson's life and thinking up to this point.

Literary criticism may make use of the methods of biography to show how a poet's life shaped a theme. Thomas Crawford's study of the poems of Robert Burns, for example, describes Burns's background, especially his exposure to Calvinism, in order to explain Burns's attitudes to religion. His attitudes are complex, and without some understanding of the man we may misunderstand the poems.

A case in point . . . I have a friend who is a very competent reader of poetry, one on whose judgment I rely. But in reading Burns's "Holy Willie's Prayer" she took the words "Holy Willie" literally to mean that Willie was a saintly man—she had no knowledge of Scottish Calvinism and the doctrine of predestination, with its division of humankind into the elect and the damned. She did not know about a consequence of the doctrine: the tendency of the elect to forgive themselves for their own trespasses while coming down like a ton of bricks on other people's. Burns's Willie is no saint—he has lifted a "lawless leg" upon more than one woman, he has been drunk on occasion, and he is spiteful and vindictive. All this went clean by my reader, and she took Willie to be a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

good man beleaguered by reprobates. With some knowledge of Burns and his culture she would have read the poem the other, right way—as the portrait of a hypocrite. Willie's posture of a holy man would have appeared ridiculous in the light of the facts about himself that he himself lets slip. But she was not looking for the slips, for she did not know that Burns detested the type.

You may think that the irony in "Holy Willie's Prayer" would be apparent to most readers. What kind of man would say, as Willie does:

> Besides I farther maun allow,
> Wi' Lizzie's lass, three times I trow—
> But, Lord, that Friday I was fou,
> When I cam near her,
> Or else Thou kens Thy servant true
> Wad never steer her.

and follow this with the self-justification:

> May be Thou lets this fleshly thorn
> Beset thy servant e'en and morn
> Lest he owre high and proud should turn
> That he's sae gifted;
> If sae, Thy hand maun e'en be borne,
> Until Thou lift it.

Is this not the peak of humility, the perfect logic of fanaticism—is this not mad? But, admitting that many readers who have not studied Burns and Scotland will seize upon the irony—and I am still surprised that this reader did not—would these readers suspect that Burns himself was not entirely unlike Willie? There is a division in Burns's attitude to sin; he will do it, and he will be sorry. If Holy Willie is a comic rather than a detestable character it is because Burns has committed Willie's sins, and is not above hoping that God will be lenient to himself. Burns understands and enjoys Holy Willie for reasons that have to do with his own religious upbringing, his revolt against it, and his arguments with his own conscience—none of which can be deduced from the poem.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The reader who thinks that Willie is just a hypocrite and a figure of fun will not appreciate what is happening in the penultimate stanza when Willie, speaking of his enemy, says:

> Lord, in the day o' vengeance try him;
> Lord, visit them wha did employ him,
> And pass not in Thy mercy by them,
> Nor hear their pray'r:
> But, for Thy people's sake, destroy them,
> An' dinna spare.

This is the voice of John Calvin, a thunder heard on the Sabbath in churches throughout Scotland. If one thinks that Burns is laughing at Willie here, one is wrong; this is Burns listening to the voice of conscience magnified in the voice of Calvin's *Institutes*. It is not a force to be trifled with, especially if it seems to be aimed at oneself—as in Burns's thinking it frequently was. But to get the full flavor of this one would have to read more than the single poem—one would have to read other poems by Burns, and it would certainly help to know something about Burns's life and the history of Scotland.

It is necessary to read at a distance as well as up close. The microscope is not the only instrument for viewing—there is also the telescope. My criticism of the New Criticism with its faith in close reading is that it tended to forget the telescope. The New Critics have denied, some of them vociferously, that this was their intent—they say that they assumed knowledge of history on the part of the reader. But this is not the way close reading was taught, and in universities all over the country we still see literary criticism that crawls over the text, from comma to comma, without lifting its head to see where it is going and whether it really matters.

In great poetry—writing that moves us to feel and think deeply—there is a theme or pattern of thought expressing a general truth that appears to have been arrived at through experience. And it appears to be involuntary—inspired, poets of an earlier age would have said. "Poetry," Shelley says, "is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the de-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

termination of the will. A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry.' " Two thousand years before Shelley, Plato said that "All good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed."

What they are possessed by is a theme, an idea that expresses the passion of the poet and, at the same time, speaks to our passions. It is for lack of this that much writing in verse fails to move—the idea is expressed without passion. Or if it is expressed with passion, the writer has forgotten the other part of the equation: it must be expressed in such a way as to appeal to our passions, as a thing we ourselves might have seen or heard. That is, it does not appeal to the senses.

Discovering the theme is the nearest we can come to the central mystery of the poem—all other parts depend on this. It would seem best, therefore, in reading to go straight for the theme, to see the most important thing about the poem before we become engrossed in the details. Indeed, unless we see the most important thing we are likely to be bogged down in the details and perhaps to misread them. To understand poetry we must understand the mind of the poet. We must have a feeling for the style—know when the words mean what they say and when the poet is being ironic.

If one grasps basic patterns of the poet's thought, textual difficulties will appear less difficult and in many instances to be of no real importance. To take a notorious case, the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound . . . If one sets out to read them through with a *Guide to the Cantos* at one's elbow, looking up every reference, the experience ceases to be poetry and becomes an exercise in looking things up. If, on the other hand, one grasps the themes of Pound's writing: his belief that there are certain gods or permanent ideas that reappear throughout the ages, destroying society and building it again—if one grasps, above all, the desire of a personality to flaunt itself and assume the posture of a talented, reckless, incorrigible bohemian, a latter-day Villon—if one grasps what it is to be Ezra Pound, then it is not necessary to look up every reference to the banking system in an Italian city some centuries ago or the behavior of an emperor in ancient China—matters, in any case, of which Pound was spottily and unreliably informed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One may treat such references as notes of music, as sounds . . . The themes, as I have described them, are the meaning of the *Cantos*—they are what give the poem such coherence as it has: the coherence of a personality that expresses itself in a few patterns or themes that are always the same. These patterns are not produced by Pound's will—they arise from the sources of his being, sources that, it is apparent, were mostly hidden from himself. One theme, that of usury, was so far from being voluntary that it turned on its maker, took over his personal life, and made him, to his everlasting ignominy, the advocate of Fascism.

One does not choose a theme, it chooses one—hence its power. Hence, also, the bad poems great poets write, along with the poems that appear to have been, in Plato's word, inspired. At the risk of seeming frivolous, I would say that the mark of a great poet is a kind of bad writing that he or she does when aesthetic considerations or social prudence would urge taking a more pleasing route. The bad writing of a great poet is compelled by the same theme or themes that produced the good—it is all of a piece. Consider this by Keats, from *Endymion*:

> O magic sleep! O comfortable bird,
> That broodest o'er the troubled sea of the mind
> Till it is hush'd and smooth!

This is a ridiculous metaphor, for birds do not smooth the waves by brooding on them. Fancy here has taken leave of sense. Nevertheless, sleep, the wish to sleep, the comfort sleep may give, in other words, a playing with the idea of death, is a major theme of Keats's writing. Within two years of writing the lines I have quoted, he was able to write these:

> Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death,
> Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
> To take into the air my quiet breath . . .

The second passage is so much better poetry than the first, not merely because the words are better but the thought be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hind the words. In the first passage the poet is satisfied to express his theme—the wish to be unconscious. In the second passage he has meditated on his theme, and developed it so as to engage the world. He speaks of wishing for a drink that would enable him to fade away and forget, "The weariness, the fever, and the fret / Here where men sit and hear each other groan." This is vastly more interesting. In both passages, however, the weak writing and the strong, the theme is consistent.

Theme is an expression of consistent thinking, an expression of character. And character is different from personality, the external man Proust said Saint-Beuve aimed to show. To speak of the poet's theme is to speak of the character of the poet—the quality that enables us to tell at a glance that a few lines of writing are by Robert Frost, or by Whitman, or by Donne. If you wish to call it style, I have only this objection—the word "style" tends to turn attention to the writer's choice and use of language, while I want to concentrate attention on the theme, the underlying, urgent thing.

Why is it so urgent? Isn't the choice and use of language just as important? Poems, followers of Mallarmé like to remind us, are made of words. Indeed they are, just as men and women are made of flesh and blood. But the flesh and blood are draped on a skeleton—and the poem must have a structure, a form dictated by the theme.

In the poetry-writing workshops that have proliferated all over the United States, I think if one were to ask the instructor what is the most difficult thing about teaching writing—if it can be taught at all—he or she would say that it is to discover a theme in a student's writing. For the most part it does not exist. Writing may come easily to young people, but very few have written great poetry. They do not have a theme, a pattern of thought that expresses the deepest self and also a truth external to the self. They find it easy to express moods and opinions, but the other part eludes them.

Without a theme writing is what Paul said of words without charity: they are sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. One arrives at a theme by living—there is no other way. To be a poet is to be open to experience; it is the feeling and sound of experience that gives writing its authority.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My dictionary defines theme as "a subject or topic of discourse, a written exercise." I have wished to show that it is something more than that. The poet's theme is an expression of his deepest, unalterable self. Some poets, the greatest, seem to have more than one theme, more than one self that compels expression. I have mentioned Yeats, but Shakespeare is the most flagrant example of the species. It is this in Shakespeare that aroused Tolstoy's antipathy. Himself divided, and unhappily so—though he did his most appealing work when divided—Tolstoy strove toward a monolithic theme, an expression of Christianity that would be perfectly simple and straightforward. It came down finally to this: "Sell all you have and give to the poor."

Whether a writer have one theme or several, it is his development of a theme that makes him effective and memorable.[2] By development I do not mean deliberate manipulation, for, as I have said, the theme is involuntary. Though the poet will meditate on the ideas that concern him most, and may consciously refine them, the reason these ideas are urgent will always elude him. Fortunately, when it comes to understanding themselves poets are no wiser than other people. They are not able to analyze themselves successfully—I think that if they could they would no longer be driven to write.

A poet should wish for enough unhappiness to keep him writing. His happiness will lie in the expression of a theme—a pattern of thought that is peculiar to him and, at the same time, of interest to the world.

Robert Frost is a case in point, and I would like to consider him at some length. Frost's poetry has been read by people who do not usually read poetry, and adopted as a rallying point for those who find modern poetry obscure. He has not, however, had nearly as much attention from the critics as Eliot, Pound, Williams, and Stevens, and much of the criticism of Frost that does exist seems amateurish. It seems not to know how to go about discussing the poetry. I think this is

[2]I have occasionally used the pronoun "he" or "his" to stand for both masculine and feminine. E.g., "The world the poet moves about in, the materials of his art . . ." There are times when to say "he or she" or "his or hers" would be distracting. My use of the masculine pronouns is not intended to exclude women or deny their stature as poets.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

because the reader of Frost's poetry feels that he is being confronted with the life of the poet at every turn, but he knows that it is wrong to take a work of art as autobiography. Yet a poem by Frost seems to be hovering around a secret, some real event—the passion in the poem seems personal. How is one to deal with this and not fall into the trap of reading the poem as a window into the life of the poet?

In reading Frost I am struck by a polarization of feelings between two characters, a husband and a wife. It occurs in "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," and "The Hill Wife." In every instance the male figure is rather hard-headed, and even dense. It is a willed denseness—he does not want to see and feel too much. The tension between those figures, so different and yet joined by marriage, is what makes the poem move.

One notices the isolation of the two. There seems to be no one else in the world—the drama is to be played out between them. I have said that the life shown in poems is different from the life of the poet, and these poems are evidence of it. In the real-life household of Robert and Elinor Frost there were several children who must have moved about or sat still, spoken or been silent. There are no children in these poems—the drama is between husband and wife alone.

What title for this theme? Robert Poirier has said that "home" is a major theme in Frost's poetry. Home is "a place, a form, a mode of discourse in which unmanageably extreme states of feeling occur." But the word "home" does not describe the drama I have in mind. The word "marriage" comes closer. And it is a marriage of poets: each of the participants is a poet, she in her way, he in his. Of the two, the woman seems to have the more poetic character—she feels deeply and speaks out of her feelings, or is feelingly silent. He, on the other hand, tends to be practical; he doesn't want to look into things too deeply—whether it be the life of a hired man or the death of a child. His motto would be, "Life must go on." In his denseness he allows the other, more feeling partner to slip away, and he learns of finalities besides the grave.

Being a poet—that is, having the temperament—may demand all one's intelligence and energy, so that one may not actually write anything. To write poetry, on the other hand,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one has to be at a distance from one's feelings and be able to play with the facts. In this "marriage of two poets" a struggle is going on between the one who feels more keenly, and fears more, and the other, more worldly poet. It is the poet of grief—and passionate love—who will lose the struggle and slip away. The poet of wisdom will survive; he has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps.

This is the theme, the central drama, of Frost's poems; other poems are footnotes to this.

I have not attempted to psychoanalyze Robert Frost—I have arrived at my ideas by reading his poems. I think that any author can be understood in this way, and that what we arrive at is what Proust called the "true self," that part of the author which thinks and creates, rather than the ordinary self which sits down to dinner and has all sorts of opinions, none of which have any direct bearing on the works he has written. The written work springs from depths of the psyche: it is written at the dictates of the character of the poet, a different self from the one who, having lit a cigar, is about to deliver an opinion on politics.

In order to discover the poet's true self one immerses oneself in the poet's works. The pattern can hardly be discovered from a single work, for poetry is dramatic, and what the poet says in one place he may not say in another—or he may contradict himself. The theme will have its variations. But when all the works are considered a basic pattern of thought will emerge.

If the single work is read in the light of this, it will have deeper resonance. The reader who grasps the thought of a poet in its entirety is able to approach the text with confidence. He knows what the poet must be thinking. In a sense, he has become the poet.

To be a poet one must discover the themes that are proper to oneself. There can be no formulas for such discoveries—there has to be an openness to experience such as Keats describes: "If a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel." Or Whitman:

There was a child went forth every day,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became.

This is the first step. Then the matter must be transformed into poetry.

If we look into the lives of poets we shall find there was a time of withdrawal from the world, of silence and meditation. We tend to think of poetry as trying to write, as having original ideas and fetching images from afar. But does poetry have no power in itself? No reality? What would happen if instead of trying to write one allowed silence to speak?

Dante has told us how he became a poet. For nine years love had ruled his soul—the image of Beatrice was always present in his mind. Then one day he saw her walking in the street between two older women of distinguished bearing. She greeted him—he experienced the height of bliss and his senses reeled.

He returned to his lonely room where, thinking of Beatrice, he fell asleep and had a vision of a lordly figure, "frightening to behold," says the poet, "yet in himself, it seemed to me, he was filled with a marvellous joy." The figure said many things of which he understood only a few, among them the words, "*Ego dominus tuus*," "I am your master." The figure held Beatrice in his arms; she was asleep, naked, and he seemed to say, "*Vide cor tuum*," "Behold your heart." It seemed that he wakened the sleeping Beatrice and prevailed upon her to eat the glowing object in his hand. Reluctantly and hesitantly she did so. A few moments later his happiness turned to bitter grief and, weeping, he gathered Beatrice in his arms and together they seemed to ascend into the heavens.

The poet felt such anguish at their departure that he woke. It was, he tells us, the first of the last nine hours of the night. Pondering what he had seen in his dream, he decided to make it known to a number of poets who were famous at the time. "As I had already tried my hand at composing in rhyme, I decided to write a sonnet in which I would greet all Love's faithful servants; and so, requesting them to interpret my dream, I described what I had seen. This was the sonnet beginning, 'To every captive soul.' "

With the passing of the old religious world poets no longer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought of themselves as inspired by a god, but still they felt prompted to write by a power outside themselves. For Wordsworth this power spoke through nature. He tells how he first became aware that he was to be a poet. He was returning home at dawn from a night spent in "dancing, gaiety, and mirth," with "Slight shocks of young love-liking interspersed," when

> Magnificent
> The morning rose, in memorable pomp,
> Glorious as e'er I had beheld—in front,
> The sea lay laughing at a distance; near,
> The solid mountains shone . . .

The scene before him included laborers going out to till the fields. "Ah! need I say, dear Friend," he says, addressing Coleridge,

> that to the brim
> My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows
> Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
> Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
> A dedicated Spirit. On I walked
> In thankful blessedness, which yet survives.

I believe that all true poets feel a sense of dedication, and that this comes to them in solitude and silence. The silence of which Pascal spoke, the silence of infinite spaces, is terrifying, and most avoid it, but poetry feeds on silence. To apprehend the silence of the universe is to wish to break it, to speak to those who are in the same boat with ourselves.

The measure of a man, said Ortega, is the amount of solitude he can stand, and great poets are those who have listened greatly. Rilke speaks of this.

> Voices. Voices. Listen, my heart, as only
> saints have listened: until the gigantic call lifted them
> off the ground; yet they kept on, impossibly,
> kneeling and didn't notice at all:
> so complete was their listening. Not that you could endure

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

God's voice—far from it. But listen to the voice of the wind
and the ceaseless message that forms itself out of silence.
Tr. by Stephen Mitchell

The task of the poet is to put into words the message that formed itself out of silence.

II. Engaging the World

"The earliest of all nations generally wrote from passion excited by real events." From this beginning Wordsworth developed an idea of the degeneration of poetic language. At first daring and figurative, it came to be used mechanically—figures of speech were applied to "feelings and thoughts with which they had no natural connection whatsoever. A language was thus insensibly produced, differing materially from the real language of men in *any situation*." (Appendix to the *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802).

What Wordsworth considered degenerate others have regarded as the best language of poetry. In his 1848 essay on "The Poetic Principle," Edgar Allan Poe said that the aim of art was to give pleasure, not to instruct. The poet should aim at creating "supernal beauty," and to be beautiful poetry must be unified and brief. Poe's ideas were introduced into France by Baudelaire, and became the doctrine of the Symbolist school that flourished in the 1880s. Mallarmé, leader of the school, said that poetry should "approach the condition of music." It should not state explicitly but suggest—"suggestion makes the dream." He spoke of a special language of poetry that would be different from the language of everyday, which he likened to coins that passed from hand to hand. For Mallarmé and his followers there was only one kind of poetry, the hermetic; narrative and discursive poetry were mixed with "impure" elements.

Fifty years later the Surrealists would divorce poetry from life altogether. The images in Symbolist poetry are recognizable—they are taken from the world perceived through the senses. But the images in Surrealist poems are invented—the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

further removed from anything one might actually see the better. Surrealist art breaks with logic and the tyranny of nature. As Ferdinand Alquié observes, in Surrealism "man is the creator of values, which have their sense only from him and relative to him." (*The Philosophy of Surrealism*)

The poetry of "real events" has not fared well at the hands of theorists such as these, and present critical theory finds little in such poetry that it can use. Those who study literature for the purpose of linguistic analysis do not find what they are seeking in poetry that is an "imitation of life." They want a "sub-text" that lends itself to the tools of analysis.

And, of course, the poetry of "real events" has lost some of its functions. It is no longer news and information. In ancient times one could learn from poetry the history of the tribe and something about the gods, or about the art of war, or when to sow seed and when to harvest. From Ovid one could learn the art of love, from Virgil how to be a good citizen. But poetry no longer relays the news—we have newspapers and television. Government manuals will tell you how to farm, and television will tell you how to have sex.

The poetry of real events could survive these losses well enough, but its main *raison d'être* appears to have been lost—why should we read narratives in verse when there are narratives in prose? If we want characters and situations, aren't they to be found in thousands of novels? There are narratives of every kind in prose that ranges from the complexity of James Joyce to the simplicity of the latest bestseller. What need, then, for characters and situations in verse?

Because they *are* in verse. Verse performs a unique function—the rhythm of measured language gives a pleasure prose does not give. Therefore it cannot be displaced by prose. It may seem to have been displaced if we go just by numbers: there are a thousand readers for a book of verse, a million for the latest blockbuster novel. But wait and see: if the verse is good it will continue to be read by someone, and read carefully, long after the prose has been forgotten.

Here is a hypothetical situation. A ship sailing on the Pacific Ocean is becalmed. It seems as motionless as a ship in a painting. This is a prose description and I think it is fair to say that none of you will remember it five minutes from now:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you may remember the situation but not the sentences, because they had no definite shape and sound. There was no measure to evoke a response from that part of our being that responds to measured speech. Suppose, on the other hand, that I had said:

> Day after day, day after day,
> We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
> As idle as a painted ship
> Upon a painted ocean.

I think we are likely to remember this description because it is in rhyme and meter. The sound and the beat compel us to remember. With free verse the point is harder to make. It is not the measure of free verse that makes an impression—though some lines of free verse do have a striking rhythm. In free verse other elements play the part that used to be played by rhyme and meter: in free verse a great deal depends on the images. And free verse is more concentrated than prose.

Poe began his essay with a disclaimer: he had no intention of being thorough or profound, but wished to discuss some minor poems that he liked—that is, "poems of little length." He then proceeded to give *Paradise Lost* and *The Iliad* the back of his hand for being uneven—poetic passages being followed by platitudinous passages. The day of these artistic anomalies, he said, was over. "If, at any time, any very long poems *were* popular in reality—which I doubt—it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again."

In Poe's time some mediocre long poems were being written—he wished to knock the classics off their pedestals in order to put a stop to the rubbish being committed in their name. I would not object to Poe's expression of his taste were it not for the effect these statements have had on the writing of *all* narrative poetry, no matter what the length. In the hands of Mallarmé and his followers, Poe's dicta were made to apply to all poetry that deals with real events—it was all considered to be inferior to hermetic poetry.

As I have said, this prejudice is common at the present time—it is in line with structuralist theory. If one regards language as a reality in itself that does not derive its importance

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from the things it refers to, then Mallarmé's kind of poetry, with its complex sentences and obscure symbolism, will be more interesting than a poetry that presents dramatic or narrative situations. Among American poets Wallace Stevens will be ranked high, and Robert Frost low. Nor will T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams be ranked high, for though their writings are experimental in form and style, they draw images from life and frequently present a human situation. "The Waste Land" is good drama, and in poem after poem Williams presents a character sketch or a passage of narrative.

At this point, encouraged by the example of Poe, I shall state a preference. Pleasant as the verse of Mallarmé or Wallace Stevens may be to listen to—I say "listen to" rather than read, for it is primarily a poetry of sound: it is impossible to grasp the sense immediately—I prefer another kind of poetry, the kind that deals with situations we recognize and ideas that seem true. And I prefer it to be written in a style that is familiar. The first of the great English poets wrote this kind of poetry, and it is still as fresh as a daisy:

> Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
> The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
> Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
> Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
> The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
> Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
> And smale foweles maken melodye,
> That slepen al the nyght with open ye
> (So priketh hem nature in hir corages);
> Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
> And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
> To ferne halwes kowthe in sondry londes;
> And specially from every shires ende
> Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,
> The hooly blissful martir for to seke,
> That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
>
> —Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The liveliness and color of Chaucer's descriptions have not been surpassed. But this is not all: he is a storyteller of considerable subtlety—see, for example, his rendering of character in *Troilus and Cressida*—and considerable power—see "The Pardoner's Tale." The background of the tale is such as we see depicted on the walls of medieval churches: the world of the Black Death in which people of every kind are snatched suddenly from the midst of their pleasures and hurled into Hell. The narrative has the evocative power of the old allegorical writing—people are not just what they appear to be, but supernatural powers in disguise:

> Whan they han goon nat fully half a mile,
> Right as they wolde han troden over a stile,
> An oold man and a povre with hem mette.
> This olde man ful mekely hem grette,
> And seyde thus, "Now, lordes, God yow see!"

One of the three dice-players and swearers of oaths greets the old man roughly and asks him why he has lived so long. To which he replies that he has not been able to find anyone who will exchange his youth for age, and that Death will not take his life.

> Thus walke I, lyk a restelees kaityf,
> And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
> I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
> And seye 'Leeve mooder, leet me in!'

The three demand to know where they can find this Death he appears to know, and he tells them: he has left Death in a grove, under a tree. Whereupon they run off and find a treasure of money lying under the tree. The plot advances to its inevitable outcome. The interest is no less because the outcome is inevitable—it is gratifying to see how the nature of the actors, their drunkenness, gambling and swearing leads to their murdering one another. The tale, through its allegorical method, evokes levels of meaning and a sense of mystery one does not usually find in prose fiction. Who is the old man the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gamblers meet? He may be Death itself, or he may be Old Age—certainly he is unforgettable, this child of earth who goes wandering and knocking with a stick on his mother's breast.

At the same time the tale is realistic, evoking in a few lines the atmosphere of the plague:

> Thise riotoures thre of whiche I telle,
> Longe erst er prime rong of any belle,
> Were set hem in a taverne for to drynke,
> And as they sat, they herde a belle clynke
> Biforn a cors, was caried to his grave.

The "pure poetry" of Mallarmé seems trivial if we compare it with Chaucer's—so much intelligence has been omitted!

What was said of one poet might be said of many: "The moment he thinks, he is a child." But how different it is when the poet presents his ideas in real situations! Following the laws of character and action, he discovers what is true in his ideas and what is false. The poets the world considers great are not those who have had fantastic ideas but whose ideas have been tested, as Keats said, on our pulses.

Wordsworth is a philosopher, but who would pay attention to his philosophy if it had not been drawn from real situations? In the lines that follow he tells how, when he was a schoolboy, in his ramblings he would come upon a shepherd of the hills, and from this came his idea of human nature.

> When up the lonely brooks on rainy days
> Angling I went, or trod the trackless hills
> By mists bewildered, suddenly mine eyes
> Have glanced upon him distant a few steps,
> In size a giant, stalking through thick fog,
> His sheep like Greenland bears; or, as he stepped
> Beyond the boundary line of some hill-shadow,
> His form hath flashed upon me, glorified
> By the deep radiance of the setting sun:
> Or him have I descried in distant sky,
> A solitary object and sublime,
> Above all height! like an aerial cross

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stationed alone upon a spiry rock
Of the Chartreuse, for worship. Thus was man
Ennobled outwardly before my sight,
And thus my heart was early introduced
To an unconscious love and reverence
Of human nature . . .

The Prelude, VIII

William Carlos Williams has been our Wordsworth. Williams said, "I go back to people. They are the origin of every bit of life that can possibly inhabit any structure, house, poem or novel of conceivable human interest . . . If we don't cling to the warmth which breathes into a house or a poem alike from human need . . . the whole matter has nothing to hold it together and becomes structurally weak so that it falls to pieces." ("The Basis of Faith in Art")

Williams's own poems are located in "real events," or at least a recognizable scene. In many a poem by Williams his curiosity about people is enough to carry the day. But poems that have no human characters, that seem to be simply describing a landscape or some common object, hold our interest for another reason. Williams is obsessed with the need to make poetry out of the most seemingly antipoetic materials; it is a challenge he has set himself. He said, "the thing that stands eternally in the way of really good writing is always one: the initial impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose. It is this difficulty that sets a value upon all works of art and makes them a necessity." ("Prologue to Kora in Hell")

This side of Williams has had considerable influence on the poets who came after. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that Williams's theory of poetry is the basic text of most poetry-writing workshops in this country. It seems that one can do no wrong if one begins from Williams, describing things exactly as they are, close to one's nose. But objects and images are only half the battle. Poetry consists of two parts, an object and an idea, and though aspiring poets can usually manage to describe an object, they are not so able to have an idea. The objects in a poem by Williams, and the arrange-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ment of objects, reflect his mind developed over a lifetime of thinking as a poet, a doctor, and a man. This is what gives his writing a vibrancy and a sense of leading somewhere. Actually the writing is leading back into the mind, pouring back into it. A young poet who adopts Williams's method of "objectivist" description without having the mind to give it coherence is likely to make poems that are pointlessly dull.

The circulatory system failed Williams when he wrote his long poem, *Paterson.* A state of mind is a good enough basis for writing a short poem, but for a long poem one needs a theme, a compelling idea, and as one ploughs through *Paterson* it is evident that Williams did not have one. Williams himself says:

> There is no direction. Whither? I
> cannot say. I cannot say
> more than how.
>
> *Paterson*, II

There are admirers of Williams who admire this—he is writing aimlessly on principle. But I think most readers will agree that *Paterson* is heavy going.

To engage the world one has to stand at a distance from the subject. "Give me where to stand," says Archimedes, "and I will move the earth." The poet's lever is his idea—with this he can move the object. As I have said, poetry consists of the object and an idea. If one or the other is lacking it is not poetry but a gas, or an unmoving lump.

In spite of the low estate to which narrative has fallen in the past hundred years, there are many who read it eagerly when they get it. Robert Frost is still a popular poet—critics may not have enjoyed his work but thousands of readers have. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is a narrative poem, though the narrative is disjointed, and it is the most prestigious poem in English written in this century. The *Cantos* of Ezra Pound deal with real events.

These poets are well known, but there have been others, not known, who have written notable works in a form of nar-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rative. I am using the word to mean writing that is an imitation of life.

Patrick Kavanagh, for example . . . I discovered his poems ten years ago. Before this I had not thought it necessary to read them. No critic had written about Kavanagh's poems. Besides, I had met the man at a cocktail party in Manhattan. There was a young girl—I think no older than seventeen—who had been brought by her mother, a literary agent, to breathe the air of Parnassus. The poet was talking to this girl—then she turned to move away. He raked his fingernails down her back. The girl uttered a scream and disappeared. For some time Kavanagh walked around looking for her, saying "Where's my Baby Doll?"

When I thought about Kavanagh I saw black-rimmed fingernails. But one day in the West of Ireland I took his *Collected Poems* with me in a boat, and read them while I fished. The poetry is accompanied in my mind by the lapping of water, sighing of reeds, and crying of birds. I wonder how much of our liking for the arts depends on circumstances—a good breakfast, interesting company, or some fine bit of natural scenery. And I wonder if much literary criticism is not oppressively grim because it was written in a study.

This is a poem by Kavanagh. The title . . . "Memory of My Father."

Every old man I see
Reminds me of my father
When he had fallen in love with death
One time when sheaves were gathered.

That man I saw in Gardner Street
Stumble on the kerb was one,
He stared at me half-eyed,
I might have been his son.

And I remember the musician
Faltering over his fiddle
In Bayswater, London,
He too set me the riddle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Every old man I see
In October-coloured weather
Seems to say to me:
"I was once your father."

This poem has always affected me strongly. There is pathos in the descriptions of the old man stumbling on a kerb and the old fiddler. In the final stanza the writing takes on the power of myth; the old men appear ancient and larger than life.

Kavanagh's most sustained poetry is "The Great Hunger." He said that he did not like the poem himself, because it was not detached—it was polemical in a way a policeman might understand, and "There is something wrong with a work of art, some kinetic vulgarity in it when it is visible to a policeman." But we cannot take as definitive what poets say about their works. They are no longer the self that wrote, and their understanding may be no better than anyone else's. Indeed, it is possible for a reader to have better insight into the meaning of a poem than the author.

The poem's title is ironic: it appears to refer to the famine in the nineteenth century that swept Ireland, killing thousands and driving other thousands into exile. But the "great hunger" of Kavanagh's poem is sexual hunger. It is not the potato that is blighted but human life. Patrick Maguire's mother "praised the man who made a field his bride," and he has done just this, passing up the women he might have married, so that in old age his life is married wretchedly to the soil.

He lives that his little fields may stay fertile when
his own body
Is spread in the bottom of a ditch under two coulters
crossed in Christ's Name.

Kavanagh is speaking of the perversion of sex but not as D. H. Lawrence speaks. Lawrence found solace in the beauty of nature and the instinctual life of the peasant. Kavanagh has something to say about this:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The world looks on
And talks of the peasant:
The peasant has no worries;
In his little lyrical fields
He ploughs and sows;
He eats fresh food,
He loves fresh women,
He is his own master
As it was in the Beginning
The simpleness of peasant life.

To this idealization Kavanagh contrasts the reality:

the peasant in his little acres is tied
To a mother's womb by the wind-toughened navel-cord
Like a goat tethered to the stump of a tree—
He circles around and around wondering why it should be.
No crash,
No drama.
That was how his life happened.
No mad hooves galloping in the sky,
But the weak, washy way of true tragedy—
A sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean
place to die.

Kavanagh develops his theme in hundreds of strong lines. The phrase "strong poet" has been used by Harold Bloom to mean the poet who replaces the poetry of the past with his own vision of things. But, as William Blake said, there is no competition among poets. Strength comes of speaking the truth, and "The Great Hunger" carries a truth in every line. Kavanagh wants us not merely to see but to share the peasant's life:

O let us kneel where the blind ploughman kneels
And learn to live without despairing
In a mud-walled space—
Illiterate, unknown and unknowing.
Let us kneel where he kneels
And feel what he feels.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

So we walk with Maguire behind the traces, or stand in the evening at the crossroads listening to the talk of the men—"words as wise / As the ruminations of cows after milking." We have a rare moment of self-generated pleasure:

> Sitting on a wooden gate,
> Sitting on a wooden gate,
> Sitting on a wooden gate
> He didn't care a damn.
> Said whatever came into his head,
> Said whatever came into his head,
> Said whatever came into his head
> And inconsequently sang.

But the direction is downward, into the clay. Maguire, denying life—that is, the love of a woman—plods to an old age without joy or meaning. And this we are told, and the poetry makes us believe, is not just the story of Patrick Maguire.

> October creaks the rotted mattress,
> The bedposts fall. No hope, No lust.
> The hungry fiend
> Screams the apocalypse of clay
> In every corner of this land.

They take poetry seriously in Ireland, as they seem to do in every country but this, and one can see why a policeman called on Kavanagh, as he tells us, with a copy of the poem in his hand, and asked, "Did you write that?" The lines that offended the policeman may have been those that describe Maguire's autoeroticism. Or the lines showing the denseness of a priest:

> "You were a good woman," said the priest,
> "And your children will miss you when you're gone.
> The likes of you this parish never knew" . . .

and the mindlessness of the peasant's religion:

> She reached five bony crooks under the tick—
> "Five pounds for Masses—won't you say them quick."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The Great Hunger" is effective social criticism because the poet shares the life he is writing about, kneels where the blind ploughman kneels.

A poetry of social criticism is convincing only insofar as the poet seems to know the people he is writing about and to feel with them, sharing their hardships and pleasures. Especially their pleasures . . . It is not enough to want to help people—you have to like them too, and for what they are, not what you want them to be.

It is instructive to compare "The Great Hunger" with the Leftish poems written by W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and their friends in the 1930s. The "Oxford Poets" preened and congratulated themselves on their social awareness and moral superiority to those who had no such awareness. But the poetry they wrote shows no familiarity with the common man and woman—they are merely figures in a landscape. This is how Spender describes a worker's funeral in the socialist state he envisages. The workers, it seems, are delighted with technology—this is what they like.

> Death is another milestone on their way.
> With laughter on their lips and with winds blowing round them
> They record simply
> How this one excelled all others in making driving belts.
>
> "The Funeral"

Has anyone ever known workers like these? Not even in the states of Eastern Europe. Even under socialism the workers are not devoted to their labor as these English poets, themselves children of the middle class, think workers should be.

Wordsworth said that poetry is written by a person "of more than usual organic sensibility" who has also "thought long and deeply." This applies to writing for a cause as much as to writing about daffodils—perhaps more, for the subject is not so attractive.

The poems that move one to feel some social injustice keenly may not be overtly political. The most useful writer, from the point of view of a reformer, is not the one who proclaims that his heart is in the right place and produces stereo-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

types of vice and virtue, but the one who renders things as they are in a manner that convinces people to change them. This is why Marxist thinkers, from Marx and Engels to Lukacs, have placed a high estimate on the novels of Balzac. Engels, in a letter to a novelist, says that Balzac gives us a wonderfully realistic history of French society, describing the pressure of the rising bourgeoisie upon the society of nobles that established itself after 1815. Though Balzac's sympathies are with the class that is doomed to extinction. ". . . his satire is never keener, his irony never more bitter, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply—the nobles. And the only men of whom he speaks with undisguised admiration are his bitterest political antagonists, the republican heroes of the Cloître Saint Méry, the men who at that time (1830-36) were indeed representatives of the popular masses." (Friedrich Engels to Margaret Harkness, 1887)

This is what is meant by "sincerity" in writing—an adherence to truth that compels the writer to render things accurately though they may be against his or her own prejudices. The sincere poet will turn satire against himself, if need be. The insincere poet, on the other hand, is the censor of his own works, wishing to show himself in the best possible light.

There was a poet—let us call him X. In his poems he himself appeared as a paragon of virtue, while others were corrupt. Once I showed him some lines of verse in which I expressed a passing mood. In my poems I express such moods; they are to be taken as part of the drama in which I—the one who is speaking—am an actor. My poems are works of imagination, not tracts or sermons: on this occasion I was showing X a poem in which the speaker saw a spirit who told him that everything his, the speaker's, senses rejected sprang up in the spiritual world. Conversely, from the spirit's point of view, matter appeared mysterious:

> Things which to us in the pure state are mysterious,
> Are your simplest articles of household use . . .

Encouraged by this, the speaker, the "I" of the poem, confesses a thought:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

. . . I have suspected
The Mixmaster knows more than I do,
The air conditioner is the better poet.

At this point X protested strongly—it was wrong of me to say such a thing, self-denigrating to say that the air conditioner was a better poet than I was. My dramatizing the idea, placing it in the mouth of a fictional self in a dramatic situation, went for nothing. My showing the fictional self to be something less than confident went by X entirely—there was no humor in his view of the poet's role. When X appeared in one of his poems it was in his own person; he aimed to speak at all times with the accent of sincerity and be regarded as a person of serious views.

I do not think, however, that sincerity is achieved by aiming at it. I think it is achieved by being frank and admitting one's weaknesses as well as one's strengths. X's idea of poetry has been held by many American poets, especially when they have written in aid of one cause or another. This kind of earnestness exhibits the superior moral position of the writer—I doubt that it convinces anyone. I suppose it may give its readers or listeners the sense of belonging to a group that thinks as they do. It has never reassured me, however, to think that my ideas were those of a group. When I thought that they were, I suspected they were wrong.

The poet is formed as the individual is, by contact with the world, and the poets who seem original are those in whom we find life keenly observed. Hugh Kenner remarks that Ezra Pound is "fanatic" about facts and dates because he believes in "the inexhaustibility of the actual, and so in imitation—reflection—rather than fabrication."—" 'Originality' consists in being able to *see* something, often to see that it has been done before." ("The Broken Mirror and the Mirror of Memory") This idea must be anathema in places where originality—that is, thinking something no one seems to have thought of before, is regarded as the be-all and end-all. This is what people are educated to think art is, and art dealers make a pretty penny out of the belief, proclaiming a new movement every few months. But originality of this kind, having no substance, blows away like a feather in the wind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The poet who would be original must steep himself in experience. Not drown, of course—he is, after all, a poet—different from other people because he desires to write poetry, though why he so desires it is useless to ask. The poet is like the speaker in Whitman's poem, "both in and out of the game." It is the being in I want to talk about, for I cannot say anything about the thought processes of the poet—they are unpredictable. The world the poet moves about in, however, the materials of his art, will bear some looking into.

It can be, at the first glance, a dreary scene, repellent and anti-poetic. I am speaking of the city and the suburbs. There are, of course, pleasant walks, well-designed apartments, and commodious houses. But millions of people have no access to these. If poetry is to say anything important it must deal with modern life in its less attractive aspects, "those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose." And these do not attach our affections—on the contrary. It is not only the slums that are repellent—buildings erected at great expense appear to have been designed to amaze the individual, disappoint his expectations, and deny him comfort. These labyrinths of metal and glass are more forbidding to the wish to create than a slum would be.

The answer is to consider people—they, not things, are the proper subject. One American poet went wrong on this point and, through an error in his thinking, was brought to despair. In "The Bridge" Hart Crane set out to write "an epic of the modern consciousness"—his own phrase—but the poem has no real idea. He concentrates on describing things, hoping to wring a meaning from them. So he apostrophizes the Brooklyn Bridge:

> Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
> And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

This is a puerile hope—matter has no ideas to impart, least of all to God. The poet, in order to hide his lack of direction, makes his language as gorgeous as he can, and the result is bombast:

> Of stars thou art the stitch and stallion glow
> And like an organ, Thou, with sound of doom—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sight, sound and flesh thou leadest from time's realm
As love strikes clear direction for the helm.

"The Bridge" is like those modern buildings I have spoken about—uninhabitable.

The thing can be done, however—a poetry of "real events" is being written in our time. Seamus Heaney, for one, is writing it. Consider this poem from the sequence titled "Singing School":

A Constable Calls

His bicycle stood at the window-sill,
The rubber cowl of a mud-splasher
Skirting the front mudguard,
Its fat black handlegrips

Heating in sunlight, the "spud"
Of the dynamo gleaming and cocked back,
The pedal treads hanging relieved
Of the boot of the law.

His cap was upside down
On the floor, next his chair.
The line of its pressure ran like a bevel
In his slightly sweating hair.

He had unstrapped
The heavy ledger, and my father
Was making tillage returns
In acres, roods, and perches.

Arithmetic and fear.
I sat staring at the polished holster
With its buttoned flap, the braid cord
Looped into the revolver butt.

"Any other root crops?
Mangolds? Marrowstems? Anything like that?"
"No." But was there not a line
Of turnips where the seed ran out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the potato field? I assumed
Small guilts and sat
Imagining the black hole in the barracks.
He stood up, shifted the baton-case

Further round on his belt,
Closed the domesday book,
Fitted his cap back with two hands,
And looked at me as he said goodbye.

A shadow bobbed in the window.
He was snapping the carrier spring
Over the ledger. His boot pushed off
And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked.

This is a drama . . . "Arithmetic and fear." But more is involved than the inquisition of one farmer by a constable. What is going on here is going on all over the land, and the words "domesday book" remind us that it has been going on for a long time. If one wishes to create a mythology it is in writing such as this that it may be accomplished. Truth is never far away, nor poetry that has the ring of truth.

III. The Drama of the Poem

"What is poetry?" Coleridge observes, "is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other." (*Biographia Literaria,* XIV) If Coleridge is right, and I think he is—I do not see how anyone can deny that poetry originates in the mind of the poet—then to understand poetry we must understand the poet. But not the man or woman who eats, sleeps, and goes about the business we all have in common . . . it is the creative mind that concerns us. This reveals itself in patterns of thought and appears as the themes of the poet's writing.

In the poetry of Keats, for example, a theme appears repeatedly. He is tempted to "die a death / of luxury" ("Sleep and Poetry"); "to hear her tender-taken breath, / And so live ever—or else swoon to death" ("Bright Star"); to "leave the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

world unseen, / And . . . fade away into the forest dim." ("Ode to a Nightingale") The theme itself is rather depressing, that pleasure brings on death, but the life of poetry is not in the subject, it is in the poet. Whenever Keats expresses this idea he is energized; his writing takes on a power of authority, a distinctive tone. He appears to have thought long and feelingly on the subject. We are moved by his sincerity, if not by the idea, and are moved to feel as he does.

"Sincerity" is a vague word, but if we are to discuss poetry we must use such words. We might use more technical words, but as poetry has to do with feelings they would miss the mark. We might find that we had invented a language of literary criticism that was an end in itself, one word relating to another but not relating to experience, having nothing to do with the effect of the poem on the reader—nothing to do with poetry at all.

The word "sincerity" is not as impractical as it seems. When we are familiar with an author we recognize his or her true self in a turn of phrase, a tone, or a rhythm. And recognition is not ours alone—poetry evokes a fairly consistent response. The response may be pleasure for some readers and dislike for others, but that is another matter. The feelings in the poetry affect the readers' feelings, and reactions are fairly predictable. A reader may not care for the poetry of Keats but he will admit that Keats is a poet. If pressed, he would admit that the poetry of Keats has certain definite virtues. Pressed further, he would quote stanza and line to explain why he feels as he does.

In speaking of readers I do not mean the public at large. The public at large does not read poetry. It may read books of verse by Rod McKuen, for example, but these are not poetry. In the discussion of poetry, as with the weather, or automobiles, or any other subject, only the opinions of those who are well-informed matter. They need not have studied poetry at a university, may have read it for themselves, but in any case they must have read widely and thoughtfully.

Such readers are capable of judging whether or not the feeling in poetry is sincere. They are clear in their own minds about what they feel. It is only a certain kind of literary theorist, caught in the thickets of his profession, who finds no meaning in words such as "sincerity" when they are applied

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to literature. Readers have to deal with situations every day that demand a feeling response; they know the words and gestures that denote love and hate, sincerity and insincerity. How can they, and why should they, have a different set of responses when they read? To the reader the words of poetry have the same meaning as they do in life. Poetry is an imitation of life, and he is moved by the poem as he would be by a real event.

When reading plays or narrative poems we see clearly that poetry is an imitation of life. Life is action, it is drama, and this is what engages our interest. Not in plays and narrative poems only, but any kind of poetry. In poetry that does not have characters and a plot there is an action of ideas.

Nothing could be wider of the mark than Mallarmé's saying that "poetry is not written with ideas, but with words." If this is true we cannot admit that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare are poets. In our time this saying of Mallarmé has given rise to the kind of literary theory I have already mentioned, that holds that literature has no meaning, it is only a series of metaphors. One cannot argue with thinking such as this—but there is no need to argue. For literature to have meaning all that is necessary is to think that it does.

There is a struggle of ideas in poetry and our response is in direct proportion to the intensity of the struggle. There is a greater pleasure in reading *Macbeth* than some simple song or ballad because in *Macbeth* more is involved.

There may be poetry that shows no struggling—indeed, no ideas. I am speaking of poetry that is felt to be good, not the usual published poetry which, indeed, has no ideas. There are poems that approach the condition of objects—the Imagist poets, and the Objectivists who came after them, attempted to write poetry that would show no trace of thought. If one examines their writings, however, one finds a tension of syntax, rhythm, and ideas. What is the image in this poem by H.D. but a juxtaposition and tension of different ideas—the idea of the sea and the idea of the forest, merging to become one thing?

Whirl up, sea—
Whirl your pointed pines.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Splash your great pines
On our rocks.
Hurl your green over us—
Cover us with your pools of fir.
"Oread"

William Carlos Williams's poems appear to be plain descriptions of things as they are:

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines—
"Spring and All"

The writings of the Objectivists are not as impersonal as they seem. In "Spring and All" the words "reddish, purplish, forked, upstanding" evoke human figures.

But now the stark dignity of
entrance—Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken.

What appeared to be a description of Spring is actually an extended metaphor or allegory of childbirth.

Keats's ode, "To Autumn," is famous for its description of calm and quiet, its sculptural immobility. Nothing could be less agitated than the personification of Autumn:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies . . .

Could anything be less dramatic? What struggle can there be in this description? Not only is there no drama, ideas seem to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be entirely absent. Keats once exclaimed, "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" In the ode "To Autumn" he seems to have attained his wish—at least, on paper.

But let us look again. This picture of Autumn as a harvester is the center of the poem. We see him at rest on the granary floor, sleeping beside a furrow, "And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep / Steady thy laden head across a brook." Finally he sits by the cider-press as it yields "the last oozings hours by hours." This is the very picture of fulfillment.

The following stanza, however, is full of sound and activity.

> Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
> Among the river sallows, borne aloft
> Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
> And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourne;
> Hedge-crickets sing . . .

We feel the contrast between this murmuring life and the sleep or drowsy watch of the harvester. We are finding beneath the surface what I have described as Keats's theme, a wish to "Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget." We may remember, too, that in another place he describes the poet as a harvester:

> When I have fears that I may cease to be
> Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
> Before high-piled books, in charactery,
> Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain . . .

Keats has always been attracted to easeful sleep and oblivion. On the other hand, he is keenly appreciative of sensuous life—no poet more so. Therefore in the "Ode to a Nightingale" he argues himself out of the temptation to fade and dissolve. Listening to the nightingale's song is a pleasure so keen that he almost swoons. He would like to remain in this condition—but if he did, he would be unable to feel anything at all.

> Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
> To thy high requiem become a sod.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Excess of pleasure brings on death. Therefore he pulls back and finds himself, like the Knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," on the cold hillside of life. But the argument has only been suspended—the dilemma is not solved. How do I know that the "I" that thinks is the real self? "Do I wake or sleep?" Perhaps the real self is the one that fades and sleeps.

In "To Autumn" the argument is still continuing. The figure of the harvester at the center of the poem is so richly conceived that it looms larger than life—the sleeping or motionlessly watching figure appears giant-like in comparison with the busy, noise-making gnats, lambs, hedge-crickets, redbreast, and swallows of the final stanza. In this poem the ease and oblivion Keats has been courting overwhelm the arguments of life. Beneath the apparently calm, untroubled surface a struggle is drawing to a close. The poet is reconciled to dying—more than reconciled, he appears to welcome it—the figure of the harvester contains a power greater than life. "Ode to Autumn" is an ode to oblivion, and in fact Keats would be dead in a year.

Aristotle in the *Poetics* confines his observations to tragedy—that is, in the theater—and epic poetry, and gives the palm to tragedy as the superior form of art. It might seem that a better title for the *Poetics* would be *How to Write a Play*. But in writing about the theater Aristotle was also writing about poetry. On the stage the drama is plain to see, in the actions of the characters. In written poetry the same actions take place in words and the stage is in the mind of the reader. Whether it be on the stage or in writing, poetry is drama—it consists of ideas in action.

Aristotle's description of poetry as an imitation of life explains why some writing moves the reader while other writing does not. The poet and the reader have an interest in common—they are human beings and subject to the same passions. The reader is engaged by ideas that speak to his hopes and fears. Writing that does not do this—that expresses feelings the reader does not share—cannot concern him much. Wordsworth described poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," and since the Romantics we have seen a great deal of poetry of this kind. But much of the feeling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

expressed has been private to the author, with a consequent diminution of the reader's interest. In his own poetry, however, Wordsworth did not apply the formula—his best poems, "Tintern Abbey," "Resolution and Independence," "Michael," the "Immortality" ode—are dramatic. There is a drama of ideas and frequently these are embodied in character and scene.

Anyone can overflow with feeling—not everyone is a poet. The poet is a "maker," embodying feeling in a form that appeals to the reader's sympathy. I think it was Randall Jarrell who told the story of a monk who was visited by an angel who told him to take up his pen and write. The angel dictated a poem; it went on for days; word of this spread through the monastery and there was a reverent hush. But when the angel vanished and the poem was read it turned out to be doggerel. So much for a spontaneous overflow of feeling unaccompanied by a sense of drama—that which speaks to the audience.

Verse that is not dramatic makes no impression. As Robert Frost said, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." Much of the verse we see in books and magazines is pointlessly descriptive—there is no investment of emotion on the part of the author and no play of ideas.

Poems are made with ideas, and the greatest poets, those who have given their name to an age, are those who express the most profound and far-reaching ideas. Their ideas may not have been original with them—on the contrary, the ideas we find in great poets appear to have been shared with the majority. Insistence on originality is symptomatic of a decline in the importance of poetry. The wish to write a poem that in its form and style is unlike any other poem, to express an idea no one has ever thought of, leads to writing poetry no one wants to read. And the wish of poets to be original is complemented by the wish of readers not to appear unfashionable. So they honor the writing they do not understand.

But the "state of poetry" is not our concern. Nothing could be less to the point than newspaper and magazine articles about how many books of poetry are sold, or poetry readings given, or who has won the prizes. Lovers of poetry need not concern themselves about such matters.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I discussed Keats's "To Autumn" because it seemed untroubled by ideas. The play of ideas is usually more obvious. Consider the most influential poem written in this century, Eliot's "The Waste Land." It is obviously dramatic—it is spoken in different voices and there is much shifting of scene. We may not grasp the meaning of the poem as a whole—and many have taken Eliot to be saying something he did not mean to say—but in line after line our interest is engaged, by an image or fragment of conversation. We felt the drama though we missed the meaning.

Eliot was particularly aware of the dramatic nature of poetry. His description of the "objective correlative" is well known:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

In other words, ideas in poetry are to be embodied in objects and actions, for, as Locke remarked, "Nothing can be perceived by the mind that was not first in the senses."

Eliot's poetry is intensely dramatic. "An idea to Donne," he wrote, "was an experience," and the same might be said of his own writing. Ideas appear as images. There are dramatic situations, and the lines have complex meanings—the writing is dramatic in detail. Coleridge observes that poetry "is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole* as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part." In the writings of an Eliot or Donne the poetry is in the play of words and phrases as well as in the whole. Every word contributes to the effect of the whole, and this is what compels us to read. Prose, on the other hand, does not have this interest. There are exceptions—the prose of Flaubert, or Conrad, or Joyce—but in general prose sentences do not have the complexity of meaning and therefore compelling force of poetry. The words and phrases are not dramatic in themselves, there is not a play of ideas in every sentence. Prose may be translated into another language without losing any-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing essential, because the choice of words doesn't really matter, the rhythm doesn't really matter. But these things are essential and provide the delight of poetry.

Consider the following lines:

> "On Margate Sands.
> I can connect
> Nothing with nothing.
> The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
> My people humble people who expect
> Nothing" . . .

The speaker is one of the women in "The Waste Land" telling how she was seduced. Her words seem straightforward, their meaning plain: she is unable to connect, to make sense of the event. But, she seems to be saying, that is the way life is for people of her class—humble people "who expect nothing." The passage reads like a statement of disillusionment—but then, she has had hardly any illusions. (Early readers of Eliot read "The Waste Land" as the statement of the disillusionment of a generation. He said that it might be their disillusionment, but it was not his.)

This is the obvious reading of the passage, but there is another and opposite meaning that lies hidden beneath the surface. At this point the reader may object that a meaning that cannot be seen may as well not exist—and I have sometimes felt that way myself when reading the exegesis of an obscure text. But what is obscure to me may be clear to another. If the critic is finding meanings we have not found for ourselves, we should not dismiss them—rather, we should ask if they are true.

As I have said, the words "I can connect / Nothing with nothing" appear to mean that the woman cannot make sense of the event. On another level, however, they can mean something entirely different, and this contrast of meanings is dramatic. The word "nothing" has appeared before in "The Waste Land." The lady in the bedroom is speaking to someone, presumably her husband or lover—

> "What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"
> Nothing again nothing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do
"You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
"Nothing?"

This emphasis on nothing gives it a positive rather than a negative value—it is darkness visible. Nothingness is a state of being, and one is reminded of the writing of Saint John of the Cross, with which Eliot is familiar, to the effect that one must have arrived at a feeling of nothingness—one must be convinced that experience is meaningless, and that there is no happiness in the world, in order to find the path of the spirit. In "The Waste Land" the word "nothing" evokes this dark stage in a spiritual journey. To ask "Do you know nothing?" is not just to be insulting, though it is that too—it is to pose a serious question about the spiritual condition of the person one is talking to.

The woman who says, "I can connect / Nothing with nothing," though she seems to be saying, "I can make no sense of anything," may actually be saying something quite different: "I am the connection—that is, I could be, if you would let me. I could connect nothing with nothing." That this is a possible interpretation of the passage appears toward the end of the poem:

> The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
> Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
> To controlling hands

The "I" of "I can connect / Nothing with nothing" is not a negligible person—she holds the key to happiness. Her people are humble people—but so, we have been told, are those who will inherit the earth. The denseness of the seducer prevented him from seeing this.

There is a complex play of ideas in these lines, and it is this kind of activity that makes the language of poetry different from the language of prose. The language of poetry is more dramatic.

What of verse that seems to have no play of meaning? I would say that it may be verse but it is not poetry, unless some other kind of activity is occurring—through imagery, for example. Images and metaphors can provide the action in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a poem as effectively as complex meanings—in a song by Burns, for example:

O, my luve is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June:
O, my luve is like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

I have been reading the poems of Juan Ramón Jiménez. One would look in vain to the poems of Jiménez for characters and scenes such as "The Waste Land" provides. There are no voices but the poet's own, and no ambiguous remarks, unless with my poor understanding of Spanish I have failed to see them. Here is a poem by Jiménez in its entirety. The translator is Antonio T. de Nicolás.

I Am Measuring Myself With God

In the middle of the sea, a ship, this one,
places, measures, cuts up, fixes, relates to
your consciousness, mine, god.
We are not crossing the sea (I alone with the ship
while all the others sleep)
we are crossing your consciousness, which now is
round, gray, rainy, welcoming,
as I am myself, god, now.

This night is identical to the one
of my departure, the one
with the pure sea, sea of even waves,
night of the gate of the moon
that one could reach climbing its trail,
moon today covered with a curtain of rain.

We are crossing, god, a consciousness
of total water in harp strings of high music,
with the accompaniment of a deep moral density.

But in the middle of the sea suddenly
your geometry appears, it places you,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it measures you, it cuts up, fixes, relates
to me and your ship I keep watch over;
this ship breaks my life in three:
one life to the east,
one to the south, another to the north,
and I in the middle, calm in the sea of the west,
filled with love,
the center of a rose made of rains of love.

Full of love, my own, a ship
and I, love in the center of love,
of so much love as the sea needs
to measure you, god.

In the middle of the sea I am measuring you,
in the middle of the sea and of this ship, this one;
I am measuring you with me, god.

This is a kind of poetry for which there are hardly any precedents in English. The writings of Donne, Herbert, and other Metaphysical Poets express religious ecstasy and an eagerness to leave the world for heaven. In Whitman's "Song of Myself" there are passages that suggest an unearthly state of consciousness. But Whitman is usually earthbound, and though the Metaphysical Poets use far-fetched conceits, their arguments are perfectly rational.

As I one ev'ning sat before my cell,
Me thoughts a starre did shoot into my lap.
I rose, and shook my clothes, as knowing well,
That from small fires comes oft no small mishap.
    When suddenly I heard one say,
    "Do as thou usest, disobey,
    Expell good motions from thy breast,
Which have the face of fire, but end in rest."

This conceit by George Herbert is typical—a shooting star compared to artillery fire. The speaker brushes the star from his clothes, and a voice tells him that, as usual, he is rejecting "good motions." The comparison is far-fetched—as Doctor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Johnson said, the Metaphysical Poets "ransacked art and nature for comparisons"—but the argument is logical. But images in the poetry of Juan Ramón Jiménez are not used for comparison—they are not metaphors to illustrate an argument. They are what he feels and sees.

Jiménez's kind of poetry is an answer to Johnson's objection to devotional poetry on the ground that it could only belittle the subject. If the poet is not concerned with glorifying God, if he is expressing his sense of God, then the question of whether the poetry is "effective" is irrelevant—he is expressing his feelings. A poem by Jiménez is like a prayer.

An image in Jiménez is not intended to start a train of thought—it is the thought. As I have said, this writing is not metaphorical. A metaphor or simile is a comparison of one thing with another, the thing one is concerned about with some other thing that has the quality one wishes to emphasize: "my luve is like a red, red rose." But suppose one actually sees one's love as a red rose? This is not comparing one thing with another, it is seeing a new thing. It is a vision.

When Rimbaud said that the poet should transform himself into a visionary, it was poetry such as this he had in mind:

> we are crossing your consciousness, which now is
> round, gray, rainy, welcoming
> as I am myself, god, now.

Jiménez means that he is crossing a gray, rainy sea that is God—he does not mean that God is like a sea. Moreover, there is no separation of the "I" that is seeing and the thing perceived. The "I" is the sea that is God.

This visionary writing is not what Aristotle called an "imitation of life." The drama is between the poet and God, directly.

The words of Diotima to Socrates point the direction this poetry is taking: " . . . the true order of going, or being led by another to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knowns what the essence of beauty is."

Afterword

The ideas I have put forward in these essays are not in favor at the present time. The poetry of "real events" is out of favor, especially in our universities. The most prestigious critics prefer writing that does not imitate life but offers a text that may be construed as the critic wishes. For these critics, ideas in poetry do not relate to life. Indeed, it is absurd to speak of life, for no one knows what it is. Poetry is only an arrangement of words, and its meaning is what the critic says it is.

There is no way to prove that such thinking is wrong. You cannot prove any thinking wrong, you can only hope people will see that another way of thinking leads to something better. "By their fruits you shall know them." The ideas about poetry I hold have been held by poets. They have written about "real events" and hoped that their words, written with feeling, would seem true. The attitude I have described as being held by critics has not helped anyone to write poetry anyone would want to read.

In the beginning people had visions of the supernatural, they saw things we no longer see, and from these visions came the need to speak of what they had seen. From the age of Homer to that of Dante poets would refer to the gods as though their existing could be taken for granted. When Dante has his dream or vision of the god of love, he writes a poem and sends it to other poets as though it were news. He does not expect them to think, "This is a pretty figure of speech." He expects them to think that the vision was of a real thing. The task of the poet is to make language measure up to the reality.

We no longer see in this way. We have not seen an absolute truth or beauty, and therefore our writing has no authority, and anyone can interpret it any way he or she pleases.

When I think of the men and women in my time who are generally felt to be poets, they are individuals who have seen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

something the rest have not seen, and as it is not possible to argue against a wisdom one does not possess, they have been recognized as having some authority. Their names have a ring—they are poets. On the other hand, most published verse has no ideas and no passion, because the writer has nothing to report.

To argue for a poetry of "real events," and to use words like "soul," "truth," and "beauty," is not merely to be against the grain of present critical theory but to be completely outside it. But I think there are readers of poetry who feel as I do a revulsion from the jargon of criticism. That is a dead end as far as poetry is concerned—it has led, and can lead, to nothing good. It would be better never to speak of poetry at all, and instead just read it to one another, than to approach it with a theory, straining to find some phrase that may be blown up into an interpretation that will reflect credit on the ingenuity of the critic, while the poetry is lost.

In these essays I have, with one or two exceptions, avoided speaking of living poets. This may be disappointing to readers who have their favorites, but I have wanted to avoid the appearance of trying to advance the reputation of this poet or that. If you wish, you may apply my remarks yourself. It will be clear that I may think highly of the writings of Denise Levertov. It is not likely that I will appreciate the writings of an Amy Clampitt.

But I shall leave ranking poets to the kind of person who likes to do it, and there are some sentences I would like to pass on to you against the next time you read an article praising or blaming a poet. The author, C. H. Sisson, is a poet. The passage is taken from his lively, perceptive, quirky book on the poetry of the first half of the twentieth century. He has this to say about listening to other people's opinions:

> In the case of either the reader or the writer of poetry, a direct relationship with the work is a *sine qua non*, and the prestiges of fashion, reputation, prizes, publications, anthologies, and public praisings and blamings are all irrelevant. The discipline is a very hard one, so that anyone who thinks literature is an easy option does not know what he is talking about and is certainly not talking about literature. On the other hand, it is also a release, for no

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pressure of examinations or of a desire to say what is acceptable to the people around one can alter the fact that the reader and writer have to find their own ways and that the satisfactions of literature, which are as real as anything in this world, in the end come only to those who do so.

English Poetry 1900–1950: An Assessment

Congratulations to the Editors and Staff of THE HUDSON REVIEW on its 40th Anniversary from its Proud Printer —

Byrd

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lend an ear to the fine melodies of Ridge Music

Ridge Music
poems by Harry Humes

To read the poems of Harry Humes is to hear the innate music of life in the tough Pennsylvania hill country.

The poems of Harry Humes are stories; he tells them with a carnal energy and a refreshing clarity of line. There is nobody like him.

$10.50; $6.95, paper

The University of Arkansas
P * R * E * S * S

Check your local bookstore or send orders to
The University of Arkansas Press, Fayettevile, AR 72701.
For VISA and MasterCard orders, call collect (501) 575-3246.
Please add $1.50 for handling.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DONALD HALL

Carlotta's Confession

"My grandfather's name was Augusto,
'ow-*goose*-toe' the way he said it.
He sailed from Sicily, Palermo
to Newark, when he was fifteen
and not quite five feet tall.
With American food, with the remarkable
effluents of New Haven, Connecticut,
and the gunfactory,
he stretched out to five-foot-one.
At thirteen I was two inches taller
than my grandfather—Carlottina
the Giantess—and I daydreamed
of becoming a nun. Augusto caressed us,
teased us, screamed at us,
and praised us—as long as we went
to Mass; I adored my grandfather
and when he died named my first child Augustus.
Gus was eight for the divorce;
Mary who is Maria now was three
and contented. My boyfriends
teased Gus and brought him presents;
on weekends it was Harry's girls. I was
miserable and called it adventure.
Devils the nuns had described
vividly for us jabbed forked tails
into me, and for every jab I took
my revenge by destroying something else:
I had a late abortion;
I married again—for six weeks.
From the third grade on, Gus spent more hours
in the principal's office after school
than he did on the playground.
I got him into Country Day at ten:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They expelled him for fighting.
He was twelve the first time the police
called me; at fifteen, larceny
and a year in reform school. Then
no more school and no jobs that lasted:
Gus never finished anything
except a joint or a pint of wine.
He never went back to a shrink
for a second appointment. Of course
he made resolutions; there was a sweetness
to him that broke my heart,
and my heart always broke
with his resolutions. When he was twenty
he resolved to kill himself:
Naturally we argued about it;
sometimes I won the arguments,
but a week later—I made pasta
every Sunday night—he'd return
with more reasons. Sometimes with a new
job or girl he'd drop the subject;
then there'd be another disaster
and he'd disappear for a week.
On a wet Sunday a month ago—
after he lost a good job
and signed up for welfare again, and moved
in again with a girlfriend
who chippied on him—he telephoned me
to say goodbye; he had said goodbye
many times before but this time
he called his own bluff—
and he failed again. The shoplifted .22
caliber target pistol left him
in Intensive Care on his back
with his eyes wide open and his left
cheek twitching every nine seconds.
They had hooked him up to a machine
but he lay staring beyond
my fury and my love forever.
For two weeks I sat beside him
all night while machines breathed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for him, rasping and hissing like metal cats.
In my head I kept arguing with him:
Now the argument ran to
pulling or not-pulling the plug. What a quarrel!
Once as I drove home
from the hospital at midnight
for a little induced sleep before
a court session in the morning,
my mind ran a movie, like those scenes
in pantomime that they show
behind titles: I watched myself tiptoe
into Gus's hospital room
in a gray light; then I glanced over
my shoulder to see that no one followed; then
I suffocated him.
The next morning the old judge delivered
his order; after supper,
with Maria holding me, I kissed Gus
a last time. The headnurse turned
the switches off one by one.
By one. Very, very slowly his heart-
beats, visible on the green monitor,
blipped further apart. One breath
a minute. Two minutes. Then there were none.
Next afternoon we buried
him in the non-denominational
(meaning Protestant) graveyard.
For three days I felt gay; then the guilt:
Repeatedly I went over
his life from the beginning, finding
always exactly my million
sins of commission, not accidental
but derived from each other,
fault breeding fault breeding fault:
selfishness, lust, cruelty, greed, malice,
laziness, pride. For years
friends had listened to my worries about Gus:
I kept talking, but if they provided
excuse or consolation
I refused to hear. When Maria

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brought me to her house and fed me
and was compassionate, I faked
a headache in order to go home,
to get back to where I could howl
and whimper in peace. I was crazy
with failure; I had married myself
to failure, now I was failure's
widow. I tried going to Church, say
what you like, where I hadn't gone
since my first divorce: My tongue grieved
for my grandfather's wine and wafer.
First I needed to make my confession,
my litany of error,
and I told the young priest how I had broken
each of the commandments
except the one that forbids us to kill.
The moment I heard myself
speak I laughed aloud—but I didn't
laugh with amusement: Carlotta
the mother who aborted one child
and daydreamed strangling another.
For penance he set a Hail Mary.
'Your sins are forgiven,' he said."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ROBERT McDOWELL

The Fifties

For ten years Boss was always on a trip.
From Chicago or New York he'd phone the house
To say goodnight or check up on his son.
The boy was always shy and studying,
So Mother-Wife would respond with little words
Then hang up lonely. So she spent her nights
Until the Open House in '56.
Boss, as usual, was on a plane
As she pulled into the visitors' parking lot.
She stepped out of her Jaguar like a queen,
Or so it seemed to her son who was watching her
From a window in his Home Room science class.
Her ankle bracelet sparkled in black-top heat;
Her red hair caught the sun and softened it.
Clearing his throat, the science teacher stared
As Mother-Wife strolled in and took his hand.
"I couldn't miss our little Einsteins' Day,"
She said. "You must be Mr. . . ."
"Just call me Bill."
Nervously he showed off their displays,
Pausing at the tar pits diorama
To brag about her son's accomplishment.
Boy had been absorbed by Spectacle—
Joanne Stocking adjusting her thick glasses—
The better to see the cow's eye she was slicing.
"Coffee?" said the teacher to Mother-Wife.
She liked his graying temples and blue eyes,
The perspiration veil above his lip.
"The faculty lounge is down the hall," he said,
And turning guided her back out the door.

After that the boy spent many nights
With sitters while his mother stayed out late.
"I've got a meeting tonight," she would explain,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then take long hours bathing and getting dressed.
Boy could hear her singing through the wall,
And sometimes he would lie down on her bed.
Boss, so busy moving, was far away
And Mother-Wife was singing just for him.

BOY.
I like it when I'm in my room preparing.
Mother works all day. When she gets out
She laughs a lot. Some mornings when it's dark
I sneak into bed with her. I touch her face.
I get this feeling. I touch her and I hurt.

MOTHER-WIFE.
The boy hides in his room, says he's preparing.
He locks the door and I must shake the knob
And yell *Go Out And Play*! I get all weepy,
Never what I want. Tonight I'll wear
A sweater, a tight one, because I am big-busted.
My date will want to lay his head on it,
And if we drive up north and the stars are bright . . .

A horn sounds off outside on the gravel drive.
She glances up then looks again at the mirror.
Her make-up could be better. She pats her hair.
She stands. She pulls her sweater down and goes,
Thinking of the teacher in the car,
Thinking of his head upon her sweater.
Boy unlocks his door and watches her.
Rushing now she pecks him on the forehead,
Smiles, pushes past him, thinking *Damn Him*,
Meaning everyone. The screen door slams.

BOY.
After she goes I lock my door again.
I open notes and pull out all my books

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On polar exploration. I study charts,
Memorize dates, names, events. I do this
To prepare for when I'm big, important,
Maybe President. Or I may leave.
Outside the galaxy it must be cold,
And that's where knowing Admiral Scott comes in.

Boss slams his office door and works the phone,
Loosens the knot of his tie and says hello.

"I got your name and number from a pal
Who says you used to be a cop up north.
He says you're good at finding what gets lost.
I'm on the road a lot, and so's my wife.
You follow me? That's right. No matter what.
I'll come in after lunch if that's ok."

At one a cab drops Boss at Mission Street.
Standing on the curb, he pulls a paper
From his vest and studies the address.
He wads the paper up and throws it down
Beside a leaflet hawking Stevenson,
Then crosses traffic, making drivers stop.
Across the street he bulls into an office,
Charges up a flight of varnished stairs
And bangs upon the frosted glass of a door.
A voice inside shouts
Open! Come on in!
Inside a woman looks up from her desk
And says *Sit Down*. Boss wrinkles in a chair.
The woman, who is writing, drops her pen.

"Ok," she says. "Suppose you fill me in."

Fidgeting with his hands, sweating a lot,
For the next half-hour the man just comes apart.
He talks about Career, his working wife,
The terrible condition of public schools.
He talks about close calls he's had on planes,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Temptations he's turned down at swank hotels.
Detective lets him talk, studies him,
And now and then makes notes on a pocket pad:

> *Mother-Wife. 26. Clothes design/62 Pacific Ave. One kid/8. Guy on road/gal on town. Out when he calls/nervous when questioned/moody/headaches every night. Description: 5' 8"/115/red hair (long) green eyes/snappy dresser (of course). Photo in hand. Tail & Shoot.*

Puffing hard Boss finishes at last.
"Are you a drinking man?" Detective asks.
Boss looks as if he's drained a wet, wet bar.
Red splotches make a pattern across his face
And down the sides of his neck. He rubs his eyes
And in the voice of a little boy says
Please.

"Let's eat up in the hills tonight," Bill says.
"You know. That spot my mother talked about.
Romantic. We'll be inspired by the view."
Mother, long dead, would laugh to see him dining
With a married girl, but he was up
Last night, hungering for sympathy.
Mother-Wife can make it stop, his feeling
That every room just wants to spit him out.
But she has troubles, too, office woes
That butt against and blunt his own distress.

"Two models got the clap and quit today;
Our Paris shipment met an airport bomb.
I'm losing eastern buyers and gaining weight."

Together they drink and bitch and feel alone.
The waiter smokes and frowns, forgetting his tip,
And airs his grievance to the kitchen help.
"Why," he asks, "when the lucky ones stop and eat,
Do they pick each other apart and whimper so?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Detective finishes her wine and smiles,
Daubing the edges of her street-smart mouth
With a linen napkin. The waiter breaks away
To fill her coffee cup. She tells him no.
He takes the bill out of his vest and waits
Because she makes a show of paying fast,
Her money already crossing the table-for-one.
"Keep the change," she says,
and wriggles out,
Hurrying through the piano bar for the door
Adjacent to the parking lot. Outside
She stops, unslings her camera, and shoots.
The couple in focus kiss beside a car,
A tender shot, then climb inside and go.
Detective finds her car and follows them,
Heading east into the purple hills.
The moon is full tonight. She is working,
Shooting rolls and rolls of evidence.
After one the rocking car she watches
Calms itself. The lovers' heads appear.
With cab-light on, Mother-Wife adjusts
The rearview mirror and works her lipstick hand.

At work the morning after a card arrives
For Mother-Wife. She skims it and sits down hard.
Detective steps to her side, places a hand
Upon her shoulder and leaves it.
"Let's talk," she says.
The office where they face each other closes
In on Mother-Wife, who sees her love life
Closing down. Detective holds a packet
In her hand. She says
"You know what's here."
The only sound that Mother-Wife can make
Is *why*?
"Because he paid," Detective says.
"I'll tell him but I'll say the film's no good.
Your husband's moving. I'll give him credit for that,
But he'll get nowhere that I would care to go."
Detective hands the packet to Mother-Wife,
Whose stricken face is a wash of love and hate.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Zoning out, Bill stares down past his knees
On which he balances his students' themes.
The grading and the writing of remarks
Is long on a Sunday night. His loafers are scuffed,
Symbolic of the way he feels each day
Before ill-mannered classes. His former wife
Once said he'd never leave his science room.
Pre-Mother-Wife he thought she might be right,
But all his options changed the day she took
Her coffee black and stared through him in the lounge.
He'd violated the Scientist's Code that day,
Working with substances he couldn't grasp.
He knew it, too, but turned away from years
Of operating as he'd learned to do.

He rubs the stubble on his face and smiles,
Stares across the room into blue TV.
The sound is off, allowing him to read
Or think as he pleases.
"Touch the phone," he says.
He does, thinking of Mother-Wife, of dinner
Last night, parking and rocking in the hills.
A scene from a gangster movie pulls him back.
His left hand falls from the silent black receiver.
The papers slip from his lap to the stained carpet.
He feels heroic in a jaundiced light
And only faintly hears the gravel crunched
By tires on the street outside. He rises slowly,
Trapped by the image, moving toward the window
Where he parts the curtains, staring still.

Reluctantly he moves out of TV,
Turning his head to look out over the lawn.
Two Hammer Men in suits are crossing it,
Resembling men he's watching in the film.
He shakes his head, trying to shake the link
Between his life and what is happening
On TV. The Hammer Men have reached the door.
Their pounding brings Bill fully back to this:

Open it, he thinks, and take what comes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He does. The Hammer Men are on him fast,
Working on his body like machines.
Bill sees his body used, a specimen,
Curiously broken without pain.
He sees his class, his distant former wife,
The peeled cow's eye upon the dissecting table.
When they break his legs he hears his one loud cry
Despite the rag he gags on. Then Mother-Wife,
The gently rocking car, insistent, yes,
Her nipples, riding high, growing hard,
His life all over hers, like church, then numb.

Boy suffers in his bedroom, pulling on
His trousers as he listens through the wall.
His father, talking low, sounds like a storm
Through which some random, painful words are clear.
How long? And *why*? The building thunder says.
Mother-Wife is silent, and Boy imagines
Her just staring through her make-up mirror.
Sing! her son commands. To make it right.
But he is willing her to sing in vain.
Alone, frightened, Boy opens his own mouth
And sings, off key, a favorite lullabye.
The morning light is gray. The room is cold.
Thunder builds on the far side of the wall.
Then Mother-Wife runs in and hugs him hard,
Rocking back and forth on the edge of the bed.
Father fills the doorway. Reaching down
He pries the two apart and lifts him up.
Father's face is cruel and pitiful.
Boy wants to kiss and slap it all at once.
Walking into the hall with Boy in his arms
He says
"Forget about your school today.
I have a surprise for you." At kitchen table
Boy and Boss sit down to spell it out.
Staring down Boss caps the sugar bowl
And wrestles with the grief he cannot pin.
"Your mother's ill," he says. "She's going away."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How long?" Boy asks.
"Until she's right again.
A month. A couple of weeks. It won't be long."

"I want to go with her," Boy says. Boss acts
As if he doesn't hear, but shakes his head
Like some slow, final pendulum. Boy cries.

"There, there," Boss says. "I saved the best till last.
You know the school I went to as a Boy?
You're starting there tomorrow. Happy now?"
Boy blubbers, wiping his sleeve across his nose,
And says
"I'll have to wear a uniform."

"I'll pick it up today. A blazer and slacks.
You'll look just like I do when I go to work.
Now cheer up, huh? The Jesuits are good!"

So Mother-Wife departs the galaxy,
Or so Boy thinks, tossing on his bed,
Taking notes from books on Admiral Scott.
He wonders if she'll starve, be forced to kill
A dog and eat it raw. He wants to grow
Up mean and fast, out-run his loneliness
And bring his mother home. The North is far.

Southeast, somewhere, Mother-Wife pulls off
The two-lane highway toward a small motel.
The room is smaller than a limousine.
She feels the change, lights a cigarette,
And sits down on the bed to count her money.
The counting is not long, she notices,
Which means a job hunt sooner than she'd like.
She misses Boy, wonders about Bill,
And even in an odd way misses Boss.
She hesitates, then reaches for the phone.
Boss says hello. He listens. He hangs up.
The caller cries, decides to take a shower,
And gets some sleep with a nudge from seconal.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For more than a year the pattern repeats itself
As Mother-Wife crisscrosses the bleak Southwest.
Sometimes she deals Blackjack in Las Vegas,
Pushes drinks in Bisbee, types in Austin.
Every night her calls to Boss break down.
In Bisbee she is fired for drinking too much.
Her money thin, her prospects all played out,
She calls up Boss and begs to come back home.
Hearing liquor in her voice he smiles,
Relishing the break he's been waiting for.

"First you'll have to fix yourself," Boss says.
Boss states his terms. Mother-Wife agrees.

Entered in a sanitarium,
Mother-Wife, aided by hypnosis,
Relives the early years of life with Boss:

MOTHER-WIFE.
I sipped my coffee in the breakfast room
And stared at wild roses winding high
Above the house, tangled in a tree.
Boss said *I'll cut them if you want me to.*
I thought of Boss stockpiling, improving us
By bringing what was free inside. At first
He only watched the hummingbirds, then hung
Up cages, hoping they'd like to feed in-doors.
When flowers bloomed I'd hear his scissors working
Nervously, as if I'd caught him talking
To himself about a secret past.

The session ends. Mother-Wife comes back
To sedatives, a wheelchair ride to bed.
The next day, sitting listless in the sun,
She manages to write some lines to Boy:

Sometimes I wake up laughing I am so happy.
Sometimes I feel the sun. Then I am humble,
A little sad. And I am with you, Love.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pines

The pines are the colour of the day. They take in
  From the changes of sky and from the bay
Each prevailing, passing shade—thus blue
  Becomes the colour of trees—as true as
And no more to be gainsaid
  Than that hint of red the light is proffering
Between the trunks, only to deny it:
  Sun now burns the whole forest black
With shadow, up to the very crow's nest
  Of each masted pine-tree: there
Such birds as range and turn in the setting light
  Rise like the spirits of trees estranged
That have yielded themselves to a single certain shade
  And, as if by a welling from within,
Darken towards the darkness night has made.

The Butterflies

They cover the tree and twitch their coloured capes,
  On thin legs, stalking delicately across
The blossoms breathing nectar at them;
  Hang upside-down like bats,
Like wobbling fans, stepping, tipping,
  Tipsily absorbed in what they seek and suck.
There is a bark-like darkness
  Of patterned wrinklings as though of wood
As wings shut against each other.
  Folded upon itself, a black

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cut-out has quit the dance;
  One opens, closes from splendour into drab,
Intent antennae preceding its advance
  Over a floor of flowers. Their skeletons
Are all outside—fine nervures
  Tracing the fourfold wings like leaves;
Their mouths are for biting with—they breathe
  Through stigmata that only a lens can reach:
The faceted eyes, a multiplying glass
  Whose whereabouts only a glass can teach,
See us as shadows if they see at all.
  It is the beauty of wings that reconciles us
To these spindles, angles, these inhuman heads
  Dipping and dipping as they sip.
The dancer's tread, the turn, the pirouette
  Come of a choreography not ours,
Velvets shaken out over flowers on flowers
  That under a thousand (can they be felt as) feet
Dreamlessly nod in vegetative sleep.

Far Point

The road ends here. If your way
lies north, then you must take
to the forest or the bay. A café
which is a poolroom which is a bar
serves clams and beer;
the woman who brings them in,
a cheerful exile here,
counts out coins
'Eins, zwei, drei . . .'
with the queen's head on them.
'Look!' I hear her say: a skiff
with an outboard goes past the window.
It's from the island (a strip of sand
with pines and houses on it) and a deer
is swimming in its wake. 'It belongs

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to the people in the boat. They should mark it.
I knew a couple who tamed a seal.
It would swim behind *them*, too,
then one day somebody shot it.'
'How would you mark a seal?' I say . . .
'It's easy to mark a deer.
You know how he found it?
It was being born. Out in the woods.
He couldn't resist touching the fur
so the mother abandoned it—
it was the smell of a man on it frightened her.'
The man opens the door:
a group of Indians are playing pool,
the usual clientele on the bar stools.
They look like lumberjacks. Americans,
they came north to stay out of the army
and never went back. Now they are grey.
He joins them and the deer
paces the veranda and tries
with its great deer's eyes
to look through
the deceptions of the long window
and find where he is.
The pool-players, backs to the light,
stand facing away
from centuries of clambake, potlatch
and tribal ferocities
down a totem-guarded coast.
The poles rotted and the seeds,
dropping inside their crevices,
turned them back into trees.
The cue's click, click
rehearses its softly merciless music
ticking away the increment
of unwanted time. We return
to the car, past fragile shacks
whose cracked white paint
the sea air is picking apart.
We discover the deer once more
that gazes right through us,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

then catching sight of a pair of dogs
arcs off to play with them,
perhaps thinks it's a dog.
Across the blue-grey strait,
the ragged ideograms of firs
in a rising and falling fog:
clouds are what we appear to contemplate
above them, then the mist
stirs, sails off
and we see it is summits
we are peering at,
that go on unveiling themselves
as if they were being created.

Parking Lot

—Albuquerque

Rain has filled all the streets
With mirrors: the desert drank them;
The asphalt, mercury to their flickerings,
Confronts the city with itself in fragments—
PARKING reading as ARK reversed
(I took it for Russian). A slice of building
Has got in on the reflection of a car
Disintegrating and reassembling between raindrops:
A piece of tree dances across the wrinkling image.
Parked, I see half a man
Float by, and hear from the missing portion
A throat being cleared and then
He walks away into his own entirety
As I look up from the pool to where
He is passing the tree. It has pieced itself together now
Beside a yellow fire hydrant
Into an appreciative maple, open-leaved
To the wet spring morning, the yellow
Dwarf that accompanies it, the sole thing
Small enough to be mirrored there whole.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Santa Fe Railroad

The tri-tone whistle of the night train
  Starts up a blues that goes no further
Than this one repeated phrase, and yet it goes
  Far enough. The desert has no need
To declare itself by fanfare. It is itself indeed
  As you and I might be only in Eden.
And so the tri-tone—flattened on its final note—
  Floats out over so much of space
There is no more to say except: these notes
  Express enough of possibility and of sadness, too,
To tell the extent and loneliness of the continent.
  Is that not so?—I ask Adelicia, who replies
When you catch the trainsounds here, it is going to rain.

The Cycle

So fine the snow
  You must look to the blackness of the trees to show
The shaping of its grain against the wind.
  The sky is as white as that descent,
The ground, too, hides what it receives
  Transforming to a blent and cleanlier white
The hanging threat vouching for more and more.
  The house is going under as the drift
Climbs walls and door and, sieving through,
  Gathers finely in a threshold line.
It appears to mean that we—the ones who've seen
  A flood seeping across that limit—
Stand guarding a frontier, the incursion
  Refusing to disband until it must, and then
Grudgingly reveal the green the spring
  Thrusts back at us, the cycle rebegun.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EMILY GROSHOLZ

Prothalamia

The Outer Banks

No ornaments but the double bed and open
solitude found in older motels off-season
with solid walls and purely anonymous cells.
Our bed was like a boat drawn up from the gray
Atlantic combing beyond our balcony;
the sound of breakers interwove in the fine
insistent pelt of rain that fell and fell
all weekend while we lingered, beached, protected,
under the sheets folded like canvas sails.

Sometimes we followed the usual path of tourists,
observing drifts of snow and Canadian geese
settle into or lift off grassy marshes
through borrowed, diamonded binoculars
that brought them up so close they wavered on
our eyes' own rushy edges, made precise
and flat by the forgetting of one dimension.
Flocks in your eye, my love, whole colonies
of gold sparks braving the darkened blue of iris.

We ran with our umbrellas pressed and flattened
like backwards feathers off the pervious wind.
Whenever the sun appeared at intervals
it scared up quarter rainbows in ones and pairs
out of the low bushes like quattrocento
angels. All things brushed across us then:
the braided strands, unbraided, of my hair
glancing your lips and cheek, and of your hands,
the touch that everywhere surprised my own.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Open Secrets

What can I tell of gratified desire,
the body's best kept secret? Open where
passion divides our streams of consciousness
and love, inspired, stormy, uncommanded,
seines the recursive tide.
Where you stand, naked as summer,
half-absorbed in the conventional labor
of rinsing coffee cups clear of their rimmed
cream at midnight, while I rearrange
mattress and sofa cushions on the floor
in imitation of the double bed
I lack. You are the heart of my invention.

Secrets of unexpected, slow transparence.
How love sets certain daily passages
of fine print in italics,
squares the odd capital in scrolling gold.
Beside your morning cup of Grand Souchang
surpassed by a traveling light and quenched
by clouds of milk, your hands
move thoughtfully about unconscious tasks.
I watch them lift the silver, ruffle a book
in search of fugitive pleasure, and recall
their spelling of my soul
so many times embodied, here and here.

The Courtyard Revisited

Sometimes I only want to go underground
down my soul's obscurer steps, to the gate
not guarded by Cerberus but by the minor
bureaucrats of the Paris Métro, taking
the diagonal subway back in the direction
Mairie des Lilas, where I used to stay
in a courtyard now reduced to rubble, blocks
of concrete haunted by ghosts of lilac and maple.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Not to meet old friends, love, but to find
you waiting in one of the possible small houses
and live there alone together for weeks on end
unoccupied by any tasks but dreaming,
reading and writing thoughts on scraps of paper,
walking the streets in evening light that lingers
till ten or eleven, running a few last errands
and then returning to cook our supper late.

Hidden away in that courtyard where no one comes
but memory, I want to lie beside you
in a bed by an open window, listening
to swallows flying home as darkness falls
with the infinite slowness of northern summer evenings,
holding your lovely body, tracing its curves
in the gathering blue obscurity and singing
quietly songs known only to you and me.

Moving

Summer night drifts through the open door,
premature nostalgia lacing the wrack
of honeysuckle, pine and vagrant wings.
The walls are bare, all our possessions packed
in last week's news. We're leaving the red soil
and clement seasons of North Carolina,
the place where we began. For once I've learned
to trust in a beginning, reckon the gain
and count the loss as loss. Yesterday squarely
stowed away transforms our common future.

Somewhere north we'll find another house,
decorate its rooms with books' and voices'
invisible extension. Let our pictures
mirror us enframed by the back country.
Then whenever snow obscures the air,
we can see ourselves in the unchanging
green of southern pinewoods left behind.
Catch, my love, the evening's raffish perfume,
rumor of butterflies pressed to the scrim
of memory, still willing to tumble in.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Tempest

At last we climbed Michelangelo's Piazzale
to command the elaborate vista Arno divides
and bounds: intaglia of terra cotta
or copper green pressed on the plains, and flanks
of the tangent mountains.

Above us, not that cobalt Italian sky
whose formal self-effacement frames and phrases,
but weltering clouds. It never rains in Florence
this time of year, but dictum's overwhelmed
by soft appearance.

Humid, warmed, the air grew up around us,
thick citronelle of linden trees in bloom.
The perfume's German, and its arias
of hushing leaves and muted summer thunder
hauntingly northern.

Lost in one of those quarrels nobody wants
but history can generate as crossings
of long entangled life lines, we sat down
in the lee of a cafe terrace, half-protected,
half-drenched by rain.

What else could we do but watch the tournaments
of cloud? They wheeled on Brunelleschi's Dome
fixed as invariant under transformation,
but meant to be seen against the wider flawless
blue dome of sky.

For us its red tiles wavered, slowly fused
like a stain on the winding currents of atmosphere.
The tears in things dissolve geometry.
So we observed by words, and the warming touch
of lips and hands.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Daisies massed on the terrace drank the rain.
Later, an intermittent beam of sunlight
broached the dusk and moved along the hills,
its path the fairest analogue we have
to a perfect line.

And yet how randomly the caressing light
wandered across the quartered town and vineyards,
planting its golden blotch on the linden trees,
our cafe's raffia arbors, and the curves
of the glinting river.

The Cliffs at Praiano

Remembering backwards, I foresaw you years
and years ago, in this lush obvious haven
for romantics, fishermen, homeless African wind.
West of Amalfi, east of Positano.
Our village curves to the sea in flights of stairs
suspended above the beach a few small
fishingboats, a clutch of swimmers, fill.
Whenever you enter our wide-angled, sultry
hotel room perched on the cliffs, or call
my name from the balcony, your presence shimmers
like a memory of great anticipation.

Every paradox religion loves
seems true as the hour opens on itself
and we fall through, into that numberless
and unexampled matrix. As the light
steps back across the cliffs and one by one
renounces the olive trees, the limestone
shelves, the Saracen fortresses, the pines.
How else could god, uncertain at the cross
of history, appear for us except
at a given hour, and how else could I touch
our love except in these particulars?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We have been happy in a truckstop south
of Roanoke, where shadows of semis loomed
across the windows, browning the yellow neon.
Love can do without the props of romance.
And yet Praiano moves us with its wild
theatrical display of elements:
headlands, currents, breezes, strands of light.
Look at the cliffs, I say, and mean instead
that you are irrevocable. Reflected
sea-light gleams on cliffs day has abandoned
just as you stand before me, in my words.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ROBERT S. CLARK

"I Don't Like Modern Music"

"I DON'T LIKE MODERN MUSIC." That is still a refrain heard while waiting in ticket lines outside concert halls and opera houses, in crowds filing out of theaters after symphony orchestras and chamber musicians have given their unavailing all, amid groups of music lovers trading stories about their recent or favorite musical experiences. If the dismissal ever had the power to surprise, it has lost that power through repetition. But what can shock is the calculation that, if the distaste embraces such works as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony Op. 9 and *Pierrot lunaire*, it encompasses much of the art music written here and in Europe over the better part of the past eighty years.

To place our current situation in perspective, it would resemble a concertgoer of the thirties declaring that he could not stomach any music written since Wagner's *Lohengrin*, or one of the 1890s calling the symphonies of Beethoven (and Schubert) beyond his comprehension and capacity to enjoy. Of course, the resistance to at least some of the works of Wagner, Beethoven and other convention-defying composers by the first audiences that heard them is well known, part of the lore adduced to shore up that straw man of Western cultural mythology, the "misunderstood artist." What is less well known is that within twenty years that resistance had retreated to only the most *derrière-garde* pockets of the musical public, that both composers were widely celebrated and even adored in their own time, and, what is more important, that their most idiosyncratic works were repeatedly heard throughout the civilized world in their own lifetimes and shortly thereafter.

Contrast this with the fate of any of our contemporary masters: take, for example, Igor Stravinsky, whose career as composer, performer and public figure is one of the century's most remarkable by anyone's reckoning. Yet you do not need the fingers of one hand to enumerate the works that have taken their place alongside Beethoven, Wagner, Mozart and company in the regularly played repertoire here and in Europe, and that small number—the aforementioned *Rite*, *Petrouchka*, *Firebird*, perhaps *Apollo* and the Divertimento from *The Fairy's Kiss*—includes just one that critics, historians and musicians would name among his most innovative and powerful. Of Arnold Schoenberg only the early and uncharacteristic *Verklärte*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nacht is frequently played; of Dmitri Shostakovich only the Fifth Symphony. And the situation is the same with all of our century's most lionized composers: a handful of pieces by Sibelius, Ravel, Prokofiev and one or two others excepted, symphony orchestras and opera houses could keep their patrons content if they refused to acknowledge the existence of anything written after 1915.

In years past, there was always a cadre of *parti pris* critics and disciples to object that it was only a matter of time until audiences, their consciousness raised and their ears attuned to new sounds, would cast off the shackles of the nineteenth-century tradition. Now, late in the eighties, I think the game is up. Most commentators would now concede that something vital changed in musical life in the early years of our century and that, though still feeling its effects, we are only now beginning to understand the change.

That musical means changed—as they always had been changing from decade to decade in European musical life, only gathering speed, like changes in all the arts, as the nineteenth century progressed—is a commonplace that has never lacked for attention. But what is often left out of accounts is how the social upheavals of the past two centuries—the developments in Europe and the impact of the New World—took their toll on the expectations and assumptions that nestled the classical tradition up until the Great War. It is a strange fact of cultural life that no comprehensive study in English has ever traced the links between Western social history and musical developments. Though a view of their interdependence underlies the work of commentators from Theodor Adorno to Henry Pleasants, the only large-scale treatment I know of to till such soil even lightly is Wilfrid Mellers' *Music in a New Found Land*—and that sticks to American music.

Yet there can be little room for doubt that the rise of what we now call classical music, coincident as it was with the rise of the European bourgeoisie, was no historical accident. Early classical music, reaching from Mozart and Haydn to perhaps the 1840s, embodied those conditions of order and discipline, the sublimation and idealization of passion and rage, that the bourgeoisie found essential to the solidification and maintenance of its hegemony. Thereafter, the vogues of Wagner, Verdi, Liszt and Massenet were the products of a rich and leisured new elite middle class that could in every way afford the luxury of a self-absorbed and hieratical art. But the growing strength of democratic America and the events that led to 1914 in Europe conspired to uproot that plant. The eclipse of the bourgeoisie, together with the spread of what might be called an international demotic music through the mass instrumentalities of radio, cinema and now television, have accompanied the gradual transfer of economic power to mass man in the Western democracies.

Vestiges of the older order do remain even so many years after

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

these forces began to transform the West: classical music is still the sport and diversion of a high bourgeoisie. But this class has lost its cohesion and cultural confidence: while it lovingly tends the altar flames of its dead masters, its gaze is inevitably distracted by the energy of the mass rites that surround its shrines. It cannot shake the suspicion that much of the talent that once would have labored in its service has found outlets in demotic music.

I believe it is now clear too that those talents who strove to continue the tradition, though they took pride in consciously flinging aside the outmoded Romantic aesthetic, were actually governed by the most Romantic of conscious or unconscious beliefs: that progress in music was inevitable, along with the public's perhaps tardy but eventual closing of ranks behind such progress; and that the individual artist or artistic creed could determine what form that progress would take, and thus set music's direction by sheer force of will. While these assumptions have been tested over and over against the obstinacy of our concertgoing public for the past half century, the shape of musical history has been forged elsewhere.

A half-year of concertgoing, beginning with a week of modern and contemporary music at the Tanglewood Music Center and ending with the Brooklyn Academy of Music's presentation of the new opera *Nixon in China* by John Adams, yields these reflections, but they were helped along by reading Charles Rosen's engaging little book *Arnold Schoenberg*,[1] which packs more wisdom and insight into a bare one hundred pages than most writers on music manage to get into thumping tomes. The watershed of the early nineteen-hundreds is one of Rosen's themes.

"During these years," Rosen asserts, "some of the aspects of conveying significance in music are in a pathological state." The chief factor in that pathology was "the breakdown of tonality." In Western music from Mozart to Mahler, it was tonal structure that provided the set of expectations within which the fundaments of music—form, rhythm, consonance and dissonance, even the individual tone—could assume meaning. But, beginning with Wagner's late works and continuing through Franck, Reger, Debussy and Scriabin into the twentieth century, that structure and its conventions were gradually dismantled, the expectations defeated more often than they were fulfilled.

> The renunciation of the symmetrical use of blocks of elements in working out musical proportions placed the weight on the smallest units, single intervals, short motifs. The expressive values of these tiny elements therefore took on an inordinate significance; they replaced syntax.

[1] Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (New York, 1975).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Schoenberg's analytical and pedagogic bent led him to seize upon these developments and render them in compositions that later came to be called "expressionist" in style. But, Rosen points out, paradoxically the expressive values of this style's elements "derived directly from tonal music. And since they took a preponderant role in composition, it was obvious that a composer would choose elements with the most powerful, even the most violent, values . . . the intervals most dissonant in traditional tonal terms: the minor second, the seventh, the tritone. . . . The expressive values of the stylistic elements were being asked to play a central structural role, one that stretched their capabilities unmercifully."

I think these observations on "the emancipation of the dissonance" (Schoenberg's term) could help an uninitiated listener understand what he heard at last year's Festival of Contemporary Music at Tanglewood. The week-long event, which drew on the skills of the Boston Symphony Chamber Players and Tanglewood Festival Chorus, but principally, as usual, on the highly accomplished and plucky students at the Music Center, was dedicated to the memory of Paul Fromm, the Chicago wine merchant who, with Aaron Copland and Gunther Schuller, made the contemporary-music "Fromm week" a fixture of Tanglewood seasons between 1958 and 1983. Though Fromm, who died aged eighty this past summer, withdrew his support in 1983 in a dispute with Schuller about programming, the Festival continues, now under the guidance of pianist Leon Fleisher and, for the past two years, the English composer Oliver Knussen.

Whatever the merits of the Fromm-Schuller years—and they were many—the new regime has broadened the Festival's scope to its indisputable advantage. This season Knussen, assisted by composer-in-residence George Perle, framed the newest music (there were twenty-one compositions written in the eighties, not counting what was heard in the electronic-music "preludes") with older works, including an evening devoted to music of the pupils of Nadia Boulanger in celebration of the centenary of her birth. To these ears much of the most effective and substantial fare was rooted in tonality—in many instances a tonality that would have made Brahms shudder, but unmistakable nonetheless. On the Boulanger program there were Stravinsky's facile but charming Septet (1953), some expert, elusive miniatures of tone painting by Louise Talma called *The Ambient Air* (1983), a diverting four-hand piano sonata by Harold Shapero (1941), and David Diamond's strong and memorable Quintet for Flute, String Trio and Piano (1937) in an especially brisk and polished performance—a find that honored the quest Knussen and Perle say they undertook for music that was "neglected" and "underrated." Similarly impressive on other programs were two Pieces for Small Orchestra (1943/1986) by the maverick American composer Conlon Nancarrow and Miriam Gideon's clever if sometimes precious song cycle *Creature to Creature* (1985).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Of course George Perle got his innings, most notably performances of his Serenade No. 3, for piano and chamber orchestra (1983), by Gilbert Kalish and the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, and his Concertino for Piano, Winds and Timpani (1980) with pianist Benjamin Pasternack and the Boston Symphony led by Seiji Ozawa. Both are nontonal works whose intervallic choices, phrase shapes and structural procedures imply a kind of exploded tonality, and both are, for this observer, exceptionally engaging and assimilable. The Serenade was particularly effective in this accomplished performance. Regretfully, I found the samples of Oliver Knussen's music heard on these evenings undistinguished, and the two pieces by his teacher Alexander Goehr that Knussen chose to conduct even less admirable.

Much of the remaining programming reflected the contemporary composer's dilemma since the time of "expressionism": the available means of creating aural significance—intervallic and chordal combinations, rhythmic play, instrumental color—all, thrust center stage into a structural role, are strained unmercifully. This dilemma seemed to vitiate the skillful efforts of composers as different as the Hungarian György Ligeti, the Pole Witold Lutoslawski, the Japanese Krodo Mori, the Greek Theodore Antoniou and the Americans Andrew Imbrie, Mark-Antony Turnage and Michael Gandolfi—though the last displayed a raw talent and resistance to the obvious that bears watching. Gerald Levinson's *Anahata*: Symphony No. 1 (1984-86) was another story: though it got an enthusiastic response from the audience, it seemed to me only a facile collection of mid-eighties bromides, particularly marred by reliance on the big unison violin lines and trite brass chords that have become the *lingua franca* of minimalism, and on an all-too-patent seasoning of Third-World exoticism that occasionally made me think of *Lawrence of Arabia*. But, as always with the Festival's offerings, one or two new works lodged in the mind: Bruce Saylor's gentle and fluent *Turns and Mordents*: Concerto for Flute and Orchestra (1977), Pierre Boulez's masterly *Memoriale* (1985) for flute, two horns and strings, based on his earlier piece *explosante. . .fixe*, and Leon Kirchner's *Music for Twelve* (1985) in a pungent reading by a dozen of the Boston Symphony Chamber Players.

Rosen calls "the breakdown of tonality" a fiction, albeit a convenient one for understanding the artistic psychology of the first years of our century. He compares Schoenberg's "emancipation of the dissonance" with Mallarmé's playful linguistic experiments of about the same time, asserting that it is no more possible to claim the dissolution of music's conventions of order than it would have been to declare the collapse of the French language. And if we clear our minds of the cant of academic music history and self-serving avant-garde propaganda, we can see that he is right, for all of that music that has accompanied the ascent of mass man in Western societies is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tonal, still trading in those major-minor and tonic-dominant oppositions, those abrupt modulations, those chromatic shifts, and those modal scales that are the staples of standard harmonic textbooks. Moreover, some of this century's most fertile musical minds have found abundant resources in tonal relations, manipulating and extending them to yield music of wit, power and imagination. One of these is Dmitri Shostakovich.

Ten years after the Soviet composer's death, a Shostakovich "revival" seems to be reaching its peak on this country's Eastern seaboard. Though our musical institutions batten on the safe and easily digested, there is just enough appetite for novelty for a composer like Shostakovich to worm his way in, almost unheeded, as it were. Over the past several years, if you had studied schedules diligently and could have afforded transportation to and from the large Eastern metropolises on a grand scale, you could have heard most of Shostakovich's important operas, symphonies, concertos, string quartets and song cycles.

In October the Leningrad State Symphony of the USSR brought one of the most popular of Shostakovich's symphonies (after the Fifth, the only *really* popular one), the Tenth in E Minor, Op. 93 (1953), to Carnegie Hall. Many American orchestras play this work too, probably in part because it has won general assent in the period since his death for a standing at or near the top of the composer's achievements. There can be little dispute about the opening movement—the mastery and the cumulative force with which it builds everything upon the opening intervals place it with the century's greatest exercises in symphonic technique—and the remaining three are at least good enough to sustain the expectations aroused by the first.

The chief conductor of the Leningrad ensemble—the city's second orchestra, incidentally, after the internationally esteemed Leningrad Philharmonic—is Alexander Dmitriev, apparently a routinier of Slavic tastes who would not cut much of a figure if turned loose in the arena of international conductorial stardom. But his mere competence at least let the characteristic sound of the ensemble come through unscathed by star-conductor egotism. And a distinctive sound it was: the massive string section, fat with vibrato, the woody voice of the oboe and the thin wail of the clarinet, and the open, almost crude sound of the brass all set it apart from the typical Western ensemble of today, the hallmark of which is a refined and homogenized blend. Most revealing was how perfectly suited these idiosyncrasies seemed to Shostakovich's instrumental writing.

It was a similar matter with the orchestra's playing of the Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto in the evening's opening half. Here Lazar Berman proved an arresting soloist, playing a version he claimed in a program note was closer to the composer's original manuscript than what is usually heard, and generally injecting life

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into the sclerotic veins of this warhorse with graceful detail and an absence of gratuitous rhetoric.

More Shostakovich turned up on other programs, from the Colorado String Quartet's appearance at the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, to a New York Philharmonic subscription concert in early October led by the East German conductor Kurt Sanderling. The all-female Colorado is another of the seemingly limitless string of startlingly good younger American groups that have galvanized interest in chamber music in this country over the past decade or so. Its performance of Shostakovich's alternately sardonic and poignant Third Quartet (1946) was matched in excellence by a rendering of the difficult Beethoven Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3, that would have honored an association of much longer than the seven years of the Colorado's existence.

At Avery Fisher Hall the orchestra's fare was Shostakovich's enigmatic final symphony, the Fifteenth—enigmatic because of its quotations in two of its movements of well-known motifs of Rossini and Wagner. In Sanderling's and the Philharmonic players' hands, the opening movement, a characteristic late Adagio, coalesced and made the citation from the Rossini *William Tell* Overture—the familiar figure of two sixteenths followed by an eighth note that many Americans link with "The Lone Ranger"—seem a natural ingredient in the long essay on a favorite rhythmic staple (one that is prominent too in the Third Quartet). But not even such a well-judged performance as this one could make the concluding movement, with its echoes of the early moments of *Die Götterdämmerung*, add up to more than pastiche and obscure posturing.

Opera, a Baroque court entertainment that evolved into a bourgeois Romantic ceremonial indulgence and, after radical transformations by Wagner and Verdi, survived the breakdown of tonality principally through the efforts of a handful of Janus-faced composers who look more and more like an emergency rescue team, is counted among the brain-dead by growing numbers of contemporary observers. With the gap between present-day popular notions of human behavior and those of the eras that produced *Don Giovanni* and *Tosca* yawning ever wider, and no crop of contemporary works in the genre winning sufficient public affection to push any of them into the repertoire, opera's present condition grows more and more perilous and its future prospects less and less sanguine. The locus of energetic ferment has shifted, though perhaps not permanently, to other kinds of musical theater, principally the American musical. Henry Pleasants, that Gibbon of the classical musical tradition, gave the opera houses only three decades of remaining life—almost twenty years ago.

The composer contemplating a new opera faces fundamental challenges of both musical style and material. One way of confront-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing them is by denying them, reaching back to musico-dramatic methods—solo aria, ensemble forms, even recitative—that sufficed earlier composers and to familiar narrative schemes that gain forced contemporaneity by ironic distancing. This was the road taken by Stravinsky and his librettists W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman in *The Rake's Progress*, their collaboration based upon the well-known series of Hogarth paintings.

This beguiling jape of an opera has enjoyed only limited success since its Venice premiere in 1951, largely because the man who loves *Tosca*—or more to the point *Don Giovanni*—is seldom capable of the leap to appreciation of Stravinsky's tonal but spiky and parodic writing in this work. And even for those of us who can warm to the composer's manner, there are barriers, mostly in the libretto, which suffers from dramatic imbalance and inconsistencies of tone. Still, much more serious flaws than these could be redeemed by the quantity of musical imagination and poetic flair the piece contains.

Unfortunately, the New York City Opera's opening performance of the *Rake* last fall was not worthy of it. Sounding tentative, coarse, sluggish and underrehearsed, the orchestra led by Jorge Mester was scant help for a competent cast that yet boasted only one performance above the routine: Stanley Wexler was a really vivid and vocally assured Nick Shadow. David Hockney's charming *faux-naif* sets and costumes, underwritten jointly by Glyndebourne, La Scala and the San Francisco Opera, and John Cox's production in general deserve to be seen widely—and to front a finer musical rendering than this one.

Nixon in China, an opera by John Adams and librettist Alice Goodman directed by the currently voguish Peter Sellars, was the centerpiece (along with director Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata*) of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in November and December. On balance a success as an evening of musical theater, it was also a focal point of many of the cultural tendencies I have cited.

The title is literal—the opera's two acts and six scenes follow Richard Nixon, his wife Pat, and Henry Kissinger and their Chinese hosts Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, his wife and Premier Chou En-Lai during the President's six-day visit to China February 21-27, 1972—and at first blush a less promising operatic subject could not be conceived of. But composer and librettist consciously chose to "mythologize" their material and their principal characters. They create a series of static tableaux that contrast cultures rather than portray the clash of action or character. At the same time, scenes of historic meetings, public spectacle (a ballet staged by Mao's wife Chiang Ch'ing called *The Red Detachment of Women*) and diplomatic ceremony (a banquet in the Great Hall of the People) are set off by intimate soliloquies for each of the principals, soliloquies that the librettist, in her note printed in the program booklet, does not hesitate to call arias. The final scene is a joint soliloquy, in which

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the principals, understood to be in bedrooms either alone or with their spouses, reflect upon the past and future of their countries and themselves.

Another of Goodman's key words is "eloquent"—and indeed, the libretto, written in slant-rhymed couplets, draws upon the colloquial ("It's prime time in the U.S.A.," "Pull over for a bite to eat," "The true left calls a spade a spade") yet rises where need be to a poetic pitch that matches the musical intensity. It descends into trivializing political spite only in portraying Kissinger. Finally, I think, the central contrast of cultures eludes both librettist and composer, but it is an honorable and often touching and involving attempt.

John Adams applies the full arsenal of minimalist effects—as *The Spirit of Seventy-Six* prepares to land in the opening sequence we hear an *ostinato* figure repeated, *Rheingold*-like, for better than a hundred bars—but the score seldom tires the listener or falls into mere note-spinning. Spoken periods provide the framework for the vocal lines, but they are often stylized by means of displaced accents; Nixon's halting manner of speech is characterized, but not satirized, by the use of repeated words. The instrumental writing is effective, relying principally on strings and brass, and at many points creates genuine dramatic tension and penetration. Only the vocal writing grows somewhat monotonous: many of the lines repeat declamatory patterns that at last become predictable. Occasionally, however, as in the final scene, the vocal passages attain their own kind of poignancy against the cannily managed orchestral fabric.

The minimalist credo, of course, embraces the most basic triadic harmony and exploits many effects thought to be worn out when Schoenberg emancipated the dissonance. Only infrequently, however, does this mean a return to rigid tonic-dominant polarity. The minimalists have instead taken their cue from the most sophisticated *popular* music of our time, and what Adams utilizes are contrasts between both tonic and modal triads and scales, abrupt shifts to distant keys after lengthy repetitions, alternations of remotely related triads and the like—the stock-in-trade of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and other advanced pop groups of the sixties and seventies, who in turn borrowed from later jazz and both American and European composed music of the twenties and thirties. The minimalists—and the style of *Nixon in China*—represent not so much a regression to the point of transition in Western music that occurred just before World War I, when the breakdown of tonality became a tacit assumption of the elite, but rather an extension of the demotic musical language that continued to evolve almost in spite of the more self-conscious parallel stream. Whether minimalism and similar currents signal a synthesis in the making that can rescue art music from its present dead end is a question no one can answer. But it is at least cheering to think about it.

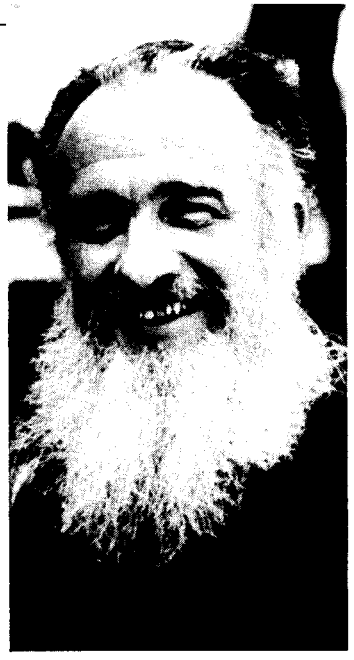
But I don't want to hurry *Nixon in China* into the textbooks just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

yet. For a time when interesting new operas that do not merely mimic older successes are as rare as panda births, I hope this one will be seen and appreciated often. Whatever Peter Sellars' excesses and willfulnesses elsewhere, the BAM production was simple in concept and dazzlingly well executed, and the musical preparation and presentation were a credit to everyone, especially the conductor, Edo de Waart. In the fine cast, many of them members of Sellars' Boston company and all repeating their roles in the Houston Grand Opera's recent premiere, were James Maddalena as a characterful and sympathetic Nixon, Carolann Page as Pat, and Trudy Ellen Craney as Madame Mao. Only Thomas Hammons as Kissinger and John Duykers as Chairman Mao fell below the general level, on both counts probably as much the weakness of the libretto (how capture a figure as complex and alien to Western experience as Mao in a few lines of verse and music?) and the direction as of the singers themselves. Standing out above all was the gifted Sanford Sylvan as Chou, whose solos were delivered to a hushed house, achieving a special heightened intensity that only occasionally surfaced elsewhere and making the Premier against all odds the star of the show.

W. D. Snodgrass
Selected Poems
1957–1987

"One of the six best poets now writing in English."
—New York Times Book Review



SOHO

At your bookstore, or call 1-800-638-3030
Distributed by Farrar, Straus & Giroux

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Myths for Moderns

MYTH AND RITUAL CONSTITUTE A POTENT WAY of transmitting a society's enduring values, of confronting the unknowable, of bonding, healing, and fortifying the race to proceed into the future. But in our world of mass communications and instant replay, every story is both momentous and trivial, no hero is any better than ourselves. Already steeped in fiction, our culture begs for a transcendence of hype, and three of the fall season's most important productions addressed the private, public and universal aspects of this question. The Joffrey Ballet's reconstruction of Nijinksy's *Le Sacre du Printemps* celebrated the myth of individual sacrifice for the benefit of the tribe, Peter Sellars' *Nixon in China* examined the myth of ordinary men making history, and Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* retold the saga of gods and men encountering each other on the moral battlefield of time.

Le Sacre, a ritualistic ballet based on Russian folklore, was created in 1913, another point in Western history when the world seemed to be drifting from its traditional moorings. Choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, composer Igor Stravinsky, and designer Nicholas Roerich conceived it as a panorama of pre-Christian Russia. I imagine a day in early spring when the sun first appears over the arctic horizon, and the people emerge to dance once more on the earth after the winter's hibernation. In little organized groups, then all together, they celebrate their survival, look for auguries of the future, enact ritual combats and matings, and, after the tribal Sage has kissed the ground, they all gaze straight at the sun and fling themselves into spasms of archaic joy. In the second act, one of the maidens, singled out almost at random, dances herself to death as an offering to the sun.

The spectacle of dancing oneself to death is oddly familiar in dance literature, though there's no evidence that human sacrifice was practiced in the society *Le Sacre* describes. It's a central issue in *Giselle*, for instance. The cause of Giselle's death is ambiguous—a seizure of madness, a suicide, or a weak heart—or perhaps a combination of all three, brought on by the discovery of Albrecht's faithlessness. But earlier her mother has warned her that she's delicate and will die an early death unless she can be prevented from dancing too much. The second act of this great Romantic ballet centers on retribution. The Wilis, representing the souls of betrayed women, capture all males who stray into their territory and make them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dance till they die. Giselle, who has not yet completed her initiation as a Wili, saves her seducer Albrecht from this fate by taking turns with him, staving off his final collapse, until dawn comes and the Wilis return once more to their graves.

In *The Red Shoes* the girl is bewitched by a pair of ballet slippers, offered temptingly by a malevolent shoemaker, and once she puts them on she can't stop dancing or take the shoes off. This ballet is the climax of a plot *à clef*, about a Diaghilev-era ballerina torn between the domineering impresario who controls her career, and an equally unyielding lover who won't let her dance at all. Uncontrollable, self-impelled flight is the resolution to both stories.

Paul Taylor's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, another ballet-within-a-ballet, has a new libretto in which a dance company rehearses a cops-and-robbers melodrama. The *Danse Sacrale* isn't a sacrifice but a paroxysm of grief at the loss of a baby, and the dancer doesn't actually die at the end of it. Instead, her identity as a character in the comic strip expires quite arbitrarily as she becomes once more a dancer in the company rehearsal. Her dance, however, carries her to an extremity of agitation, distorted speed, and peril.

There's a mysterious attraction about the idea of dancing oneself to death. It represents the ultimate physical expenditure, more demanding and at the same time more psychologically intricate than marathon running or parachute jumping or any other act of daring. The dancer's goal, unlike the athlete's or the stuntperson's, is *not* to survive the ordeal. Or at least, as in Albrecht's case, to be rescued from it by someone else's hand. Dancing, at its most flamboyant and excruciating limits, is a personal challenge for the dancer, and finally its momentum cannot be stopped. At that point, for the spectators, it surpasses mere performance and becomes a sacrament. It becomes a ritual act that can serve different purposes—retribution and atonement, punishment, reconciliation of conflicting interests, or, as in the original *Sacre*, a propitiation of the gods, an offering of a single life to claim life for the rest of the tribe.

To us this seems barbaric, but what makes it believable is that the *Sacre*'s Chosen Maiden acts as a member of a community. She sees it has become her role to do this, and she does it willingly. She's not a victim, like the Chosen in some other versions of *Sacre*, Martha Graham's for instance. In fact, the idea of self-sacrifice, as opposed to self-interest or victimization, lifts the act out of the class of personal tragedy into the realm of myth.

Today's national leaders are obsessed with the means by which they can make their actions seem to serve great purposes rather than petty ones. The Alice Goodman–John Adams modernist opera *Nixon in China*, as directed by Peter Sellars, is all about this posturing as it might have taken place during Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to the land of Mao Tse-tung. It would require reams of analysis and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

several more viewings to excavate all the layers of ironic representation in this production, but the main ones I noticed had to do with role-reversals. Who are the heroes and who are the common people? What do the leaders really think, and what are they only saying to impress audiences, cameras, or each other? Or do they really think at all?

The whole opera begins with a chorus of forty-five men and women in plain clothes, standing still and facing the audience, singing or chanting a sort of proletarian ten commandments, with assertions like "The people are the heroes now." Chairman Mao arrives for his meeting with Nixon as a puppet, propped up and moved limb-by-limb by three women in grey uniforms, who later echo his pronouncements in close harmony like the Andrews Sisters. In the same scene Henry Kissinger shadows Nixon like an attendant in a mental ward, hovering close to make sure his patient doesn't do anything out of line and at the same time paying the sycophant's compliment of imitation. Mao and Chou En-lai extol the revolution, singing about frontiers and faith, and they sound like Walt Whitman or William Jennings Bryan. Nixon issues Confucian proverbs and platitudes. Pat Nixon in her most soulful moments resorts to lines from American popular songs.

In a program note for the Brooklyn Academy performances, librettist Alice Goodman reports with a straight face how she researched the Nixon pilgrimage, and how the opera's collaborators tried to capture the "eloquence" and "heroic quality" of all the characters. The style of the opera shows up their noblest aspirations as hackneyed slogans, no bigger than a billboard. John Adams gives the orchestra a standard, repetitive minimalist sound, but the singing, with the exception of some stentorian choruses that sound like Philip Glass, is written on mostly atonal melodic lines and has an expressionistic, almost sentimental sound, like Samuel Barber. Mark Morris' choreography for the performance of *The Red Detachment of Women* that the Nixons are taken to see is choppy and unvirtuosic, providing nothing more than an excuse for Chiang Ch'ing (Madame Mao) to offer her militant platform for the cultural revolution. Dressed in dark blue fatigues, she is a closet sensualist, unlike the fluffily feminine but repressed Pat Nixon.

As the evening thundered along, I kept seeing the conventions of grand opera being parodied—the gigantic scale of intimate events, the vainglorious posings of singers as they delivered their arias. In the final scene, all six principal characters have soliloquies that are supposed to reveal their private thoughts. They are stationed beside a row of beds that could be in a dormitory. Some embrace, some curl up with their blankets, some sit on the end of the bed and stare out into space. When you see the president as Linus, can you believe he's making history?

The postmodern aesthetic has taken some strange paths in its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quest for objectivity. *Nixon* is not the first revisionist work of our times, but what keeps me offbase about it is that there already is a Nixon history—highly unsavory—which the authors disregard. They don't come out and say their principals are the benefactors of mankind, or summit conferences are a charade, or world leaders are just dopey, fallible guys who can't be expected to cope with saving the world any better than anyone else. Well, I can't stomach the idea of Richard Nixon as a sympathetic character, and possibly not even as a cartoon. I saw *Nixon in China* on the eve of the Reagan–Gorbachev summit, and their script sounded as if it had been plagiarized right off the BAM stage. The audience for both shows, after being manipulated in all directions by the performers, was left to make up its own myth.

Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* also insists on the impossibility of distinguishing absolutely between good and evil, but his production's style is far from neutral. *Mahabharata* is the counterculture gone amok—the politics of poor theater and egalitarianism inflated until they virtually cancel themselves out. Brook developed the text and the ensemble over several years in France, and his intention was to create a truly global version of the Indian epic, with spectacular scale and an ecumenical cast. In Brooklyn, where the production ran for three-and-a-half months, an abandoned theater was "renovated" for it by BAM according to Brook's specifications. Perhaps it's not fair to judge a play by its theater, but the BAM Majestic's contradictory message is too blatant to ignore.

Modeled after the Bouffes du Nord, Brook's home theater in Paris, the Majestic is actually a deconstruction. The original space was gutted. Plain benches, ranged in amphitheater style, replaced the seats. The proscenium arch was opened to release the stage into the house. In the lobby spaces, stairs, and interior, all decoration was removed except for some remnants of the theater's 1904 Beaux-Arts decor. What the present-day audience sees is a romantic ruin, in colors of red, green and clay, with cracked plaster, exposed dusty brick, Corinthian columns and crumbling bas reliefs. BAM's informative press release on the Majestic explains that "elements of its previous use" have been left for the audience to view. I saw the building as a five-million-dollar living monument to the obsolescence of traditional theater. For me it evoked the 1968 student uprisings in Paris, and the Spartan zeal with which we witnessed dance making itself over in the filthy lofts of Soho two decades ago.

But Brook's rendition of the *Mahabharata* doesn't carry those populist yearnings forward into the eighties. In fact, because it labors under the same Western, historicizing impulses as the re-creation of the building, it gives the same outdated messages. Theater is escapism, tourism, an elaborate and beautifully staged legend out of a storybook, reserved for the rich and indolent—tickets for the all-day or three-evening spectacle cost just under $100.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Brook chose to present the *Mahabharata*'s sweeping narrative in as nearly traditional terms as possible. It's told as a story, and the succeeding generations of lovers and warriors, servants, exiles and villains, intimates and vassals of the gods, all journey before our eyes in the most accessible and wondrous form. There's a splendid wedding procession, a magic circle of fire, a great war machine represented by whirling ladders. There's atmospheric music made by every kind of instrument, from the aboriginal didgeridu to Japanese drums and African kalimba. The ideas behind the spectacle are overwhelmingly verbal and apocalyptic. The Pandava brothers' adventures lead them from power to ruin and back again. They're constantly galloping to the brink of total destruction and somehow reversing their fate. "Why these murders? Why are you killing these children?" someone asks at the very beginning. There's no answer, except that war is inevitable, and so is survival. "Death has entered the mind of kings. We must expect suffering." After the family survives one last conflagration and the audience survives ten hours of marvels and admonishments, I'm ready to believe, as one of the characters says, that "Each day's death strikes, and we live as if we were immortal. That is the greatest wonder."

Peter Brook wants us to hear the lessons of the *Mahabharata* for our own times. But what gives these ancient texts their longevity is their appeal to the spirit as well as to the mind and the senses. Brook's *Mahabharata* is overwhelmingly literal. It has no poetry, no dance, and the omission is crucial. In a condescending speech to the Drama Desk, reprinted in the *Village Voice*, Brook assumes that we know nothing of the *Mahabharata* or its philosophical tradition. I guess that's his explanation for bringing the production to us in a thoroughly familiar idiom. But we've seen a great deal of Indian and South Asian performance here, including episodes from the *Mahabharata*. What has captivated me about them is their non-realistic elements, and especially the movement. After Brook's *Mahabharata*, I realized that dance, whether classical ballet or Bharata Natyam or Kathakali, always transports us outside ourselves, and this is what Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* doesn't achieve. Repeatedly, some character would begin to sway or hop or gesture as if preparing to dance, and then the motion would congeal into a pose, the rhythm would lapse into language. I longed for the actors to show us a part of themselves that would escape time, blur identity, repair the rifts and dissolve the barriers that separated them. I wanted to be swept for a moment off the worldly plane. The story they told was mythological, but *they* were not, and so the experience never became any more than real for me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RICHARD HORNBY

The Decline of the American Musical Comedy

AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS HAVE TRADITIONALLY SCORNED musical comedies—even when they secretly enjoyed them. Their attitude reflects our puritan tradition. Musicals are too obviously pleasurable, too much fun, to be taken seriously as drama.

This is unfortunate. American musicals, particularly those written in the golden age starting in the late twenties and lasting until around 1960, include some of our best writing for the theatre. (It is no accident that this period also produced most of our best non-musical drama.) The vigorous themes of sexual repression, religious fundamentalism, and the gambler instinct in *Guys and Dolls*; the graceful metadramatic interplay of *The Taming of the Shrew* with the framing play in *Kiss Me Kate*; the surprisingly dark undercurrents in *Oklahoma!*; the romantic charm of *My Fair Lady*; all look pretty good by hindsight, especially at a time when our idea of a good "serious" play consists of people sitting around talking about selling real estate.

Yes, American musicals have frequently been sentimental, shallow, star-oriented, commercial, showy, vulgar. These are old complaints, but they could just as easily be made about much of our non-musical drama as well; they are flaws in our theatre generally rather than being limited to musicals. There is nothing inherently bad about combining music with theatre. If there were, we would have to exclude from serious consideration Shakespeare, Molière, Goethe, the Greeks, and indeed most of the drama ever written. Considered historically, musical theatre is the norm; non-musical theatre is an aberration that arose in the late nineteenth century with the rise of realism, another kind of puritanism that scorned music as artificial and frivolous.

In the past two decades, the Broadway musical has suffered a gradual decline. This is true even in purely statistical terms; one season it even looked for a while as if there would not be *any* entrants in the musical comedy category for Broadway's Tony Award. This past fall there were a few more in quantity, but they were no better in quality. Although more expensive than ever, they lacked even the glamour of musicals of yore; instead, they just seemed heavy and overdone.

Into the Woods, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and book by James Lapine (who also directed), was the most promising.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sondheim is the best composer now writing for the Broadway stage; any of his musicals has to be considered a major event. The book is based on the Grimms' fairy tales, a rich source of material to say the least, and the wistful quality that is Sondheim's musical signature would seem well suited to it. The production starred Bernadette Peters, a performer with solid musical talent, stage charm, and comic sensibility. The design team—Tony Straiges, Richard Nelson, and Ann Hould-Ward—were the same who did the sets, lighting, and costumes respectively for *Sunday in the Park with George*, a show with weaknesses but visually outstanding.

The result of all this talent and money? Dull designs, duller music, and the dullest of scripts. If you are accustomed to reading fairy tales to your children to get them to go to sleep, send them to this show instead; it is guaranteed to do the trick. The plot has no less than three fairy tales going at once—Little Red Riding Hood, the Baker and His Wife, and Jack and the Beanstalk—plus snatches of Cinderella and Rapunzel. It is thus impossible to identify with any of the heroes (essential in fairy tales), or even to take much interest in them. Besides, Lapine has all the tales wind up by the end of the first act; the second has the leftover characters wandering around the woods, menaced by the wife of the dead giant from Jack and the Beanstalk, or maybe it was Grendel's mother from *Beowulf*—at that point I could not have cared less.

Nor could the author, who was only interested in using the tales to illustrate points from Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*, a great book but definitely not a playwriting text. As in much avant-garde theatre nowadays, everything in *Into the Woods* is archetypal, with no attempt to individualize the characters or become engaged in their situations. The wolf, for example, is nothing but a walking male sex symbol, complete with suggested genitals, and Little Red Riding Hood acts like a bored woman at a singles bar. Their encounter is about sex and nothing else; the basket of food, grandma, and the woods are treated perfunctorily, as mere proxies for their previously latent meanings. The audience is constantly reminded that the woods that give the play its title are *not* woods, but Bettelheim's psychological forest: "Since ancient times," he writes in a passage often quoted, "the near-impenetrable forest in which we get lost has symbolized the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world of our unconscious." The trouble with this show, however, is that the woods do not *symbolize* our unconscious, they are *literally* our unconscious. Sondheim's lyrics even include the sententious lines, "Into the woods you have to go, / For that is how you learn to grow," which I guess we were all supposed to jot down in our notebooks to study. Sondheim and Lapine ought to have read the passage in Bettelheim in which he specifically warns against explaining the psychological meanings of fairy tales to your young listeners.

Sondheim, like Frank Loesser, began as a musical comedy lyricist before taking up composing. I have never been impressed by Sond-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

heim's lyrics, however, which tend to be overly clever or, as here, overly weighty. His music, often delightful, at times falls into the same sins, particularly lately as he has come under the influence of contemporary academic composing, in which melody is scorned and gimmickry prized. Like Sir Arthur Sullivan or Leonard Bernstein, Sondheim writes his best music for fun, and becomes worse the more serious he gets.

The performers of *Into the Woods* were good, particularly Joanna Gleason as the baker's wife. Peters was hampered by her sappy witch's part, which had her doing an old crone bit in the first act and then suddenly turn into her lovely self for the second. (This is again straight Bettelheim, who writes of how "the parent in the fairy tale becomes separated into two figures, representative of the opposite feelings of loving and rejecting.") The trouble was that in the script the witch is never much of an antagonist, nor involved with the other characters in any real way, so that Peters just seemed to be wandering through the play in search of a role. All in all, I would have vastly preferred to have seen the same people in Paul Sills's *Story Theatre*, in which the same tales are presented in a simple straightforward way, with charming little songs, and a real savoring of the material.

Teddy and Alice, based on Theodore Roosevelt's relationship with his irrepressible daughter Alice, opened in November at the big new Minskoff Theatre, with a book by Jerome Alden, and music adapted from the marches of John Philip Sousa. The advance publicity made much of the idea that this was supposed to be a musical based on the personal, rather than the political, side of TR's career in the White House. Nevertheless, Alden managed to cram in references to McKinley's assassination, the Trusts, the Panama Canal, San Juan Hill, the National Parks, the Russo-Japanese War, the Pure Food and Drug Act, the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, the Suffragettes, and the Muckrakers—and that was just the first act! The cast of characters included J.P. Morgan, E. H. Harriman, Henry Cabot Lodge, Elihu Root, William Howard Taft, the young FDR and Eleanor, Samuel Gompers, and Ida Tarbell. With this historical phantasmagoria, it was hard even to find Teddy and Alice, much less become interested in them.

The inspiration for the show appears to have been Roosevelt's famous remark, quoted in the play, about being able to run the country or run his daughter but not both. In fact, Alice seems to have been no more than an ordinarily energetic debutante; her rebelliousness as depicted here consists of such things as coming home late from a dance or wearing a blue (hence the term "Alice Blue," her great historical contribution) rather than a white gown to her coming-out party. Teddy tries to delay her match to Congressman Nick Longworth, something Freud might have made much of but not Alden; even the paltry argument over the gown is more intense.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Musicologists have been revaluating Sousa's music of late (which is probably the reason for using it in this show), and I must confess a weakness for it ever since the day, many years ago, when my parents bought an album of Sousa 78s, and I would march around the living room to the rousing strains. (It was World War II, and anything military was fashionable.) But Hal Hackady's lyrics and Richard Kapp's arrangements vitiate Sousa's naive charm, and the resulting tunes are lifeless. Maybe it's just that the music was never originally meant to be sung. As in *Into the Woods*, the performers here could not be blamed; Len Cariou was a solid Teddy, Nancy Hume a lively Alice, and the rest of the huge cast were unexceptionable, especially when you consider the poor material. Robin Wagner's settings were as tame and unfocussed as the script, but Donald Saddler's choreography was crisp and colorful, and Theoni V. Aldredge's costumes had the lovely period charm that so much else sadly lacked.

As with so many other musicals written in the past few decades, both *Into the Woods* and *Teddy and Alice* have become infected with an irritating, shallow intellectualism. Perhaps it is because of the outrageous ticket prices; perhaps it is the college diplomas that theatre people now all have; perhaps it is the result of generations of critics carping about the slightness of musicals. Whatever the reason, the creators of musicals (one can't even properly say musical *comedy* any more!) now feel compelled to prove their intellectual credentials, and turn the theatre into an adult education class. A little learning is a dangerous thing. All the same old sins of sentimentality, shallowness, etc., remain, but now there is a new one—pretentiousness.

Ironically, the biggest hit musical of the year in New York is neither of the above, but a revival at Lincoln Center of Cole Porter's *Anything Goes*, starring the magnificent Patti LuPone, who hits the stage like a rocket and never comes down. As in most musical comedies in the good old days, the book for the show is slight. It involves a stock location—a cruise ship—and a long list of stock characters, including a romantic adventurer, a romantic blonde heroine whom he pursues, a comic gangster, a silly-ass Englishman, a pompous dowager, and a comic female lead, the tough-talking Reno Sweeney, a role originally created by Ethel Merman and so admirably reanimated here by LuPone. It is all really just an excuse to string together a lot of silly gags, both verbal and visual, interspersed with wonderful musical numbers, most of which are motivated by nothing more than the feeling that there hasn't been a song for a while and it's about time to have one. The book was originally put together by no fewer than four people—Guy Bolton, P. G. Wodehouse, Howard Lindsay, and Russel Crouse. It has been adapted for this production by Timothy Crouse and John Weidman, which is in itself nothing new; I have seen half-a-dozen productions of the piece (it is a staple of regional and college theatres), and it has never been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the same twice. The multiple authorship and continuous revising underscore the fact that *Anything Goes* does not reflect great playwriting, and was never meant to, but unlike more recent musicals it does at least reflect *honest* playwriting.

Honest playwriting is unpretentious and unapologetic; the playwright enjoys what he is doing, and is stimulated creatively by it. Honest playwriting is therefore not done with a history or psychology text at your elbow; the focus of attention is on the play itself as it evolves, which is revised and re-revised not to give it more intellectual respectability but to make it work better on its own terms. Writing a play is a lot more like sculpting a statue than it is like delivering a lecture. It is more a matter of shaping and arranging than it is like directly "saying" anything. This does not imply that good plays have no meanings—on the contrary, they have many, are *overloaded* with meanings, so that they mean different things depending on how you consider them. It is not meaningfulness that is bad, but narrowness of meaning, which occurs when you nervously try to load on mental ballast. As Samuel Goldwyn said to his screenwriters, "Messages is for the Western Union."

Cole Porter's music displays the same kind of honesty shown in the script. Popular music, like popular theatre, requires the performer to do more than just realize it, but to become its co-creator. It is sentimental and naive to characterize the music of Porter, or Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Frank Loesser, etc., as great in the classical sense, because their music does not function the way Beethoven's or Mozart's does. Classical composers provide the performer with a challenge to be risen to; popular composers provide raw material to be transmuted into something brand new. If their songs are any good, they become not classics but *standards*, simple, catchy tunes that hundreds of singers will perform, each in a way that is unique. If Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa conduct the Jupiter Symphony differently, we argue over which one is more correct; if Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra sing "I Get a Kick Out of You" differently, there is no question of correctness, only of which performance is better as a piece of music in itself. Thus, while Beethoven's music is great, Cole Porter's music is only *potentially* great.

Pretentiousness is deadly in popular music or theatre, not only for all the usual reasons but because it changes the essential nature of the form. It is no longer raw material, but aspires to be a finished work, and must therefore meet requirements of richness, subtlety, complexity, and unity not necessary in the popular script or song. It also cuts itself off from further major creation by the performer. Thus, while Cole Porter's songs have become standards, Sondheim's rarely have, particularly in his recent shows.

Anything Goes was originally scheduled to close in January, but has been extended at least until June. See it even if you have to rob your grandmother's purse to buy the tickets ($40 for the *cheapest* seat—ouch!); LuPone alone is worth it. Her looks are unusual. She

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

has an odd, stubby little body, and a head that looks too big for it. With her enormous, expressive eyes, ample nose, and a mouth as wide as Times Square, she is not your typical star. The dialogue in this version of *Anything Goes* actually gives her the line (perhaps an ad lib), "Do I look like a duck?" to which the answer ought to be "Yes," if you stopped to think about it, but who could? This ugly duckling is somehow transmogrified into an unbelievably gorgeous, vivacious, sexy woman. In fact, it's almost a flaw; you can't imagine why "Billy Crocker," the romantic male lead (nicely played by Howard McGillin), would reject her attention in favor of Kathleen Mahony-Bennett, who is pretty and talented, but totally eclipsed in her romantic heroine role. The part of Reno was written for Ethel Merman, plump and plain, who would have given it the combination of brass and pathos it ought to have. Patti LuPone, as great a performer in her own right as Merman (she is best known for the title role in *Evita*, another musical in the pretentious category), has the brass, plus a belting style more lyrical than Merman's and just as wonderful, plus an awesome sexual charm that has every male in the audience panting after her. So what if there is no pathos?

The rest of the cast are all delightful, especially Bill McCutcheon as Moonface Martin, "Public Enemy Number 13." Tony Walton designed the costumes and the lovely, abstracted shipboard setting, an art-deco treat in crisp white, blue, and stainless steel (but don't look too closely at the onstage white piano in the first scene, where the word YAMAHA says more than its name). The principal locale is the ship's deck, with two levels set in front of a blue cyclorama; there are two staircases at either side of the stage, leading from the stage floor proper to the upper level, which has the show's orchestra, disguised in white uniforms as the ship's band, arranged around the ship's shiny red funnel. This means that the conductor, Edward Strauss, has his back to the singers, but nonetheless the coordination (perhaps done with a hidden TV screen?) is flawless, and the orchestra sounds always superb. The choreographer, Michael Smuin, has staged the dances and musical numbers with energy and period flavor, and the director, Jerry Zaks, whom I have not always liked in the past, this time handles space well (the excellent sets, of course, help), and combines richness of detail in the large cast with a sure sense of focus and timing.

Lanford Wilson's *Burn This* concerns three young people—two dancers and a copywriter—who share a Soho loft. The male dancer, a homosexual, has just died in a boating accident, and it becomes clear, in their grief, that the two remaining roommates were in love with him. The female dancer has a boyfriend, a successful screenwriter, whom she likes but does not really love; when the dead roommate's brother arrives, a bizarre, drunk, long-haired, foul-mouthed individual, she falls into a passionate affair with him, despite their obvious differences in temperament and basic dislike for each other. In the end, the woman's remaining roommate (the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

advertising writer) has moved out, leaving a scornful note ending with the words, "Burn this"; her ex-boyfriend has gone to Hollywood; her new lover has lost his job as maître d'hôtel in a New Jersey restaurant and separated from his wife and family; and the two mismatched sweethearts are left alone with each other in dismay and despair.

Burn This displays the narrowness of scope and looseness of structure so typical of realistic American playwriting today. What elevates Wilson above similar writers like David Mamet, Marsha Norman, Michael Weller, or Tina Howe is his surer literary sense; behind the apparently shapeless slices of life in his plays are traditional literary devices that invigorate what would otherwise be tame pieces of reportage. The brother in *Burn This* is a traditional intruder figure going back to Aristophanic comedy, an *alazon*, or boaster and spoilsport, who tries to gain access to the feast; in *Burn This* he even interrupts a champagne supper between the young woman and the screenwriter. The love triangle, and the general movement from death and separation to a new union, are typical of Western comedy over the past two millennia.

Furthermore, Wilson gives all the traditional archetypes a sardonic twist. The intruder, who seems so bohemian, actually has a very middle-class job plus a wife and family, just as the dancers and writers, whom we would expect to have an unconventional lifestyle, seem very staid and bourgeois. The "happy" ending, with the couple united, is so bitter that it does not seem comic at all except in the ironic sense. Other white American playwrights today—whether commercial, serious, or avant-garde—are either all surface or all depth; Wilson's plays have both an engaging surface and intriguing depths. He is not a great writer; he usually shrinks from even indirect treatment of major existential or social themes, and his dialogue lacks the distinction found, for example, in our black playwrights like August Wilson, whose *Fences* I reviewed here last fall. But he is a good minor playwright, which is about all he seems to want to be.

John Malkovich is so explosive as the brother that he has been compared to the young Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Like Brando, he comes on so strong that he threatens to overwhelm the play. In this case, however, the rest of the cast balances him beautifully. Joan Allen is sensitive, intelligent, and emotionally powerful; she also has the bodily control to convince you that she is a professional dancer. Jonathan Hogan gives a superbly detailed yet spontaneous performance as the screenwriter, and Lou Liberatore, as the third roommate, knows how to play a background role with skill and insight without ever calling undue attention to himself. Marshall W. Mason, one of our best directors of original plays, directed with his usual skill and care; John Lee Beatty's magnificent setting of the loft with its cast-iron columns, set against a backdrop of windows showing a huge trompe l'oeil of a hazy skyline, deserves all the awards it will probably win.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BERT CARDULLO

In Praise of British Cinema

I'VE SEEN THE MOST RECENT, highly touted products from our own country and from the Continent, and I'm not impressed. Claude Berri's *Jean de Florette* is more an homage to Marcel Pagnol than a film of independent vision, and I think that Pagnol's own film of the same material, *Manon of the Springs* (1952), is homage enough to him—especially if it were restored to its original length of some five to six hours and released in two parts, as Berri is releasing his remake in two parts (Part II, *Manon of the Springs*, will have appeared by the time this chronicle reaches print; Berri has adapted his films and taken his titles from the two-volume novel that Pagnol made of *his* film in 1962). Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg* is doomed by its desire both to chronicle history and to probe the complex character of the Polish-German socialist leader. This is a job better done by "print" biographers; von Trotta can give us little more than cinema-by-pastiche. Stanley Kubrick, for his part, manages to give us something simplistic, confused, contrived, and overlong (yet incomplete) all at once: *Full Metal Jacket*. This is really a generic film about WAR, not a reflection on the Viet Nam experience, and if Kubrick enthusiasts tell me that this is what makes *Full Metal Jacket* great, I'll cite for them the most fundamental tenet of realistic art: the universal must spring from the particular, not the other way around. As for Brian De Palma's *Untouchables*, all I can say is that those who are calling this a gangster picture should reread Robert Warshow's famous essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero." De Palma tried to make a contemporary gangster picture four years ago with *Scarface* and failed miserably. Now he makes a film about Eliot Ness and his boys and everybody raves; Al Capone, Ness's prey, is relegated to the background. If there had been some substance to the cops' side of this story, it wouldn't have been a hit television series for so many years. Goodness may sell, but it's evil that resonates.

The films that interest me most lately are coming out of England, not France, Germany, and the United States, to name just three countries that enjoy higher standing than the English in film history. Indeed, England is enjoying something of a film renaissance, though I'm tired of hearing how little the English have contributed over the years to film art (no one disputes that they had a lot to do with the invention and perfection of the equipment of filmmaking). Although it's true that they have not produced a director of the cal-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

iber of Renoir, Fellini, Bergman, or Kurosawa, they *have* produced some good directors and some very good films. Part of the problem, I'm convinced, is England's long and rich theatrical tradition, which surely must siphon off a lot of directing talent that, in another country, would be drawn to film. Still, the English have given us the underappreciated wartime semi-documentaries, the best of which is Humphrey Jennings' *Fires Were Started* (1943); the Ealing Studio comedies, among them *Tight Little Island* (1949), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), and *The Man in the White Suit* (1951); and three directors known for their excellent adaptations of literary or dramatic sources: David Lean, Laurence Olivier, and Carol Reed. Then there are the social-realist films of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which, in my view, are at least as good as the overrated (though, obviously, historically important) products of Italian neorealism. I'm thinking particularly of *Room at the Top* (1958), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), *A Kind of Loving* (1962), and *This Sporting Life* (1963), the last two films directed, respectively, by John Schlesinger and Lindsay Anderson, the largest talents to emerge from this period.

The social-realist films were the products of the "Angry Young Men"—angry at a society that had educated them above their class origins yet had inevitably failed to provide sufficient opportunities for them in so small a country as England; angry at a government that had improved the living and working conditions of the proletariat but had done nothing to remove class barriers, had in fact locked those barriers more firmly in place by giving the workers what they wanted, to a point. The new wave of English films to reach these shores takes a less angry, more humorous look at society, looks at decades past as well as its own decade, and includes women, homosexuals, and Pakistanis among its main characters. It's as if the English cinema is coming of age, if English society is not; as if the English cinema has discovered that humor can serve as release from (permanently?) troubled times in addition to affirmation of good ones (as in the Ealing Studio comedies, which followed in the wake of postwar euphoria). I won't discuss Stephen Frears's *My Beautiful Laundrette* here, since it was released about two years ago, but this is one of the films I'm speaking of: alternately grim and comic, it distills Pakistani-English tensions in London through the homosexual love affair between Omar and Johnny, former schoolmates who operate a laundromat together. Three new films in the same league with *My Beautiful Laundrette* are: *Wish You Were Here*; *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*; and *Withnail and I*.

Lynda (Emily Lloyd) in *Wish You Were Here* wishes she *weren't* there, in an English seaside town in 1951. The very first shot tells us this: we see her as a little girl during the war, wearing a gas mask even though there's no gas. The teenaged Lynda is suffocated by lower-middle-class English life; she's hungry for experience and hungry for opportunity, and when she can't get them, she goes out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back to a shed and dons her gas mask from the war. Her younger sister is a conventional "little lady," her father wants to keep her in line (her mother died when she was eleven), and the men who desire her—both her own age and her father's—don't share her desire to break free of provincial shackles. That Lynda is a woman only tightens the shackles on her, and one of Emily Lloyd's accomplishments in this film is to suggest her character's nascent awareness of this fact. Lynda quits hairdressing school, gets fired from her secretarial job at a bus company, gets fired from her waitress' job at a tea room, all because she can't tolerate restrictions on her freedom of expression, which is mainly sexual; her society defines her as a sexual being, then punishes her for freely expressing that sexuality, both in words and in actions. Her (comic) response to her oppressors: "Up your bum," a line that recurs like a leitmotif throughout this film, that Lynda even sings at a few points. Society nearly has the last laugh on her, however, when she gets pregnant by her father's friend, who is the projectionist at the local movie theater and with whom she's gone to live after leaving home. Her affair with this man has been partly a slap in her father's face, partly a meeting of similarly sexual sensibilities. The pregnancy ends their B-movie idyll and Lynda gets money for an abortion from her aunt, who tells her, "You keep that kid and no one will want to know you, no one will want to own you." That's all the rebellious Lynda has to hear: she takes the money, goes off and has the child, and triumphantly returns, in a bright yellow dress with baby in tow, to scandalize the town that spawned her. It's as if she knows that, baby or no baby, there will be no real escape for her from this town, this country, this time in which she lives. So she goes them all one better by going them one worse: she'll stay, she'll not be owned, and she'll stand out in anger at the iniquities society heaps upon her sex and her class. A comic reconciliation, with a twist.

The last sequence of *Wish You Were Here* duplicates the first, which we get right after the shot of the young Lynda in a gas mask, and serves as a kind of coda: on the boardwalk of this seaside town, Lynda bicycles past an old lady in heavy makeup and abbreviated costume, tap-dancing to and miming the song "Lost in a Dream," which plays on her nearby Victrola. The director and screenwriter, David Leland (co-scenarist of the lurid and sentimental *Mona Lisa*), holds at the end on a shot of the old lady, who finishes her routine, packs up, and leaves the frame as the credits roll. Unlike the later Fellini, Leland is not pointing up this woman's eccentricity for its own sake (for one thing, he keeps his camera somewhat at a distance from her); he's suggesting, I believe, that Lynda's vitality and unconventionality may in time get twisted into equally eccentric, even grotesque, expression. There may not be much social and economic opportunity for Lynda in the provincial England of 1951, but there's plenty of audience for her "performances": her "leg show" as she rides past whistling teenaged boys on the boardwalk;

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her near striptease before the leering drivers at the bus company; her insulting address to the elderly, upper-class crowd at the Paris Tea Room after she gets fired; her defiant stroll through town with her baby. As her sexuality and anger dim, however, Lynda may find herself, like the old lady, lost in a dream of her youth and without any audience whatsoever. That's the chance she takes, that she has no choice but to take.

Leland's script falters in only one respect: he places too much emphasis, through flashbacks, on Lynda's warm relationship with her mother, who died when she was eleven, and standoffish relationship with her father, about whom she says, "He didn't love me. He didn't show it." This turns her into a psychological case for whom everything would have turned out all right had her mother lived or had her father opened up to her. But Lynda is no mere headstrong girl chained in by a cold, repressive father; she is, rather, an emblematic figure whose problems derive, in the first place, from the very social structure that produced a man like her father and that is filled with other men like him—men who populate this film and up against whom Lynda is forever running, from her Uncle Harry at the bus company to the psychiatrist her father forces her to see. Indeed, the second sequence in the film sets up this very opposition between male and female worlds: Leland crosscuts twice between Parfitts' School of Hairdressing, where Lynda brags about her breasts as she ruins a rival's hair, and a barber shop, where the talk is of gambling as Lynda's father cuts the projectionist's hair.

Leland's cutting is equally deft at other moments in the film and indicates his knowledge that by cutting, or not cutting, you don't just select what the viewer must see if he is to comprehend your narrative, you create meaning. Two more examples. Lynda goes to the projectionist's apartment to live and finds him in his bed, which is in the middle of one large room. She sits down next to him and he begins undressing her; the camera moves to a long shot and stays there. We see, not close-ups of clothing being peeled off a lovely young body, but a man in his forties hungrily undressing a teenager in a seedy room above a movie house. The light is dim and the colors are therefore indistinct; the smell, as Lynda says, is of "booze and fags." This environment, seen in long shot, creates a mood of pathos, not passion, of tawdriness, not temptation. Leland holds his camera even longer on the scene in which Lynda's aunt advises her to get an abortion. We see the two of them in medium shot, sitting at a table; they talk quietly but demonstratively for some time, then the aunt takes from her purse the money that will pay for the abortion. Leland cuts to a close-up of the money—the first cut in the scene, and one that is all the more powerful because the conversation between Lynda and her aunt has not occurred in conventional shot-reverse-shot fashion. Leland highlights the money less because the whole scene has been leading up to its appearance than because Lynda will do with it the opposite of what is expected.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By taking the money out of context, through the close-up, he suggests that Lynda will do the same: take it out of the context in which it was given to her and apply it in the reverse one.

Rita, Sue and Bob Too, like *Wish You Were Here*, is about the teenager-as-suffocated-by-provincial-life. The differences are that Rita and Sue are working-class girls in the 1980s and that they seem unaware of their own suffocation. Sex in this comedy is not so much an outlet for pent-up frustrations and aggressions as it is just plain fun—certainly more fun than school and work. Rita and Sue are sixteen-year-olds who live with their respective families in the slums of Bradford, Yorkshire. The pair serve as babysitters for Bob and Michelle, a middle-class, suburban couple in their thirties. Michelle doesn't care for sex and Bob can't get enough; he sees in Rita and Sue the opportunity to get as much as he wants, and they happily oblige him. The comic complications arise when they begin to compete for him and when his wife discovers his adulteries. Along the way, Rita gets pregnant by Bob but loses the child, and Sue carries on an additional affair with a high-strung Pakistani. By the end of the film, Michelle has taken her kids and left, and Sue has joined Rita as one of Bob's roommates. The last shot—regrettably, a silly freeze-frame—shows Bob diving into bed with the two girls.

A sex comedy, yes. But is *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* anything more than this? Yes and no. The film does not ignore the economically depressed life of the Bradford council flats; nor does it ignore the implications of Sue's relationship with a Pakistani, whom her drunken father calls a "black bastard." But if the director, Alan Clarke, and his screenwriter, Andrea Dunbar (who based the script on two plays of hers produced at the Royal Court in London), wanted to make a sex comedy, why add these elements? Why not make Rita and Sue middle-class neighbors of Bob's and drop the Pakistani (and with him the scenes set in Bradford's Pakistani ghetto) out of the film altogether? Because to do so would be to diminish the film somewhat, to diminish its realism. Sex, or rather lust, rules this world—a realistic statement in itself—but that doesn't make this world any less imperfect that the world as we know it. And the imperfections of this world don't make its characters, particularly Rita and Sue, any more self-aware than their actual counterparts in Bradford. Like the characters in farce, Rita, Sue, and Bob seem to be aware of nothing but their immediate desires—in this case, their desire for sex. (All credit to the actors Siobhan Finneran, Michelle Holmes, and George Costigan for achieving this difficult effect.) In a sense, this dehumanizes them, and consequently we find them funny; in another sense, it does the opposite—they seem as real, in their single-mindedness, as a lot of people I've encountered. One of the contrivances of realistic art is to assume the self-consciousness, burgeoning or full-blown, of its characters, and hence their suffering. It does this to important end, of course, as in the comedy-drama *Wish You Were Here*. One of the realistic byprod-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ucts of the farcical, by contrast, is to suggest the unself-consciousness or obsessiveness of its characters, and hence their imperviousness to all but the need to satisfy their own desires. Couple this realistic "byproduct" with a realistic and representative environment, shoot it all in "living" but garish color, as Ivan Strasburg has done, and you get the sex comedy *Rita, Sue and Bob Too.* And don't forget Alan Clarke's lively camera, which necessarily must spend more time tracking the continuous action than contemplating it.

In the very first shot of *Withnail and I,* Bruce Robinson's camera tracks in on his alter ego, "I," who is deep in thought, but the point is that "I" is stationary and deep in thought, as will be the camera for much of the rest of the film. *Withnail and I* is a seriocomic contemplation of the end of the 1960s and of the end of a period in the director-screenwriter Robinson's life when it was possible to be contentedly idle and thoughtfully serious at the same time. (Robinson began as an actor; viewers may remember him as the English lieutenant pursued by Adèle in Truffaut's *Story of Adèle H.* [1975].) Withnail and "I" are young, mostly unemployed actors in the London of 1969. They live together in a seedy, claustrophobic flat, subsist on unemployment checks and an occasional handout from their fathers, and drink as much alcohol and smoke as much pot as they can get their hands on. To arouse themselves from stupor, they take speed furnished by the drug dealer Danny, who floats in and out of their apartment and is given to such statements as, "Why trust one drug and not another? That's politics, isn't it?" Withnail is the more self-destructive of the two, in part because he's convinced that he's a great but undiscovered acting talent. He's also the dominant half of the relationship, taking out his professional frustrations on "I" at every opportunity. But it is "I" who keeps their relationship together and who decides that they need to get out of the maddening city for awhile. No, these two aren't homosexuals, aren't generic homosexual actors (see *Prick Up Your Ears* for that story); they are friends whose attachment to each other is lack of stage success as much as anything else. To its credit, Robinson's screenplay doesn't try to explain their relationship, the absence of women or even other friends from their lives, their penchant for excess. These two characters emanate as much from the *Zeitgeist* as from their own psyches; we get a slice of the *Zeitgeist* and of their lives, just as the decade and their relationship are coming to a close.

There is some sex comedy in the film, and this occurs out in the country, where Withnail and "I" occupy, with permission, the cottage of Withnail's rich, homosexual Uncle Monty, who drops in unexpectedly for a visit. Monty lusts after "I," "I" resists, and Monty persists, while the devilish Withnail looks the other way. Country life hardly suits these two actors, especially country life as conducted by Monty, who acts the role of respectable squire for the neighbors and disapproves of his guests' endangerment of that false respectability through their antics. Monty never does seduce "I" and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quietly, sadly returns to London alone. Withnail and "I" follow shortly thereafter: "I" has received a telegram calling him back to the city for an audition. He gets, not the small part he thought he was up for, but the lead in a regional repertory production. His bag packed and his hair cut short, "I" heads for the train station, so eager to move into his new role that at the halfway point he leaves the accompanying Withnail behind in the rain, clutching a wine bottle and quoting Hamlet. As the credits come up, Withnail walks away from the camera in long shot, back to the apartment from which he is soon to be evicted.

For Danny, the sixties were "the greatest decade in the history of mankind." For Monty, they were a time in which the English were "shat on by Tories, shuttled out by Labor." For Bruce Robinson, the sixties were epitomized by Withnail, by this one man with whom he shared so much time, drink, food, and drugs. Robinson's saner talent, it could be said, killed the relationship—he ended up getting work, Withnail didn't—and this film, then, is both his lament at the loss of Withnail and his celebration of his own perseverance through difficult yet exuberant times. Robinson looks back, not in nostalgia, but in wonder—wonder at how he made it through the peculiar haze of the sixties. Withnail happened to accompany him through that haze, and Robinson remembers him for it. *Remembers* him, not analyzes him, not analyzes his significance in Robinson's own life. He's helped by Richard E. Grant's inward-looking, slippery Withnail and by Paul McGann's steady, slowly awakening "I"; by the music of Jimi Hendrix (among the songs, "Purple Haze"), which, in its simultaneous swagger and ethereality, evokes the late sixties better than any other music of the period; by Peter Hannan's cinematography, whose colors outside are pallid and inside seem to steam up off the screen, and which several times utilizes shallow focus during outdoor scenes; and by his own device of having "I" only intermittently comment in voice-over on the action.

I am fonder of *Withnail and I* than of the more ambitious *Wish You Were Here* and the funnier *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, not so much because it captures the decade in which I came of age but because I, too, had my Withnail. Paradoxically, Bruce Robinson's personal memoir is the professional memoir of many of us, I suspect. Of that time in our lives when we roomed with someone feeding off the same dream as ours and who was wrongly condemned to live out that dream only in his mind. Opportunity separated me, like Robinson, from my Withnail. I think of him often, so this film wasn't the occasion of my locating him in my memory. But *Withnail and I* has marked out his space, if you will. It's his more than mine, and in the end, this film gives it back to him, gives it back to Withnail, who thought for so long that he had forfeited it to failure. He is the last person we see in this film, not "I." He may walk away from the camera, but he still holds the frame; his "narrator" may have departed, yet he persists.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fiduciary
Trust
International

Fiduciary Trust Company International
Two World Trade Center
New York, N.Y. 10048-0772
(212) 466-4100

Lawrence S. Huntington, Chairman
L. F. Boker Doyle, President

Directors

Charles Crocker
Walter J. P. Curley, Jr.
L. F. Boker Doyle
Henry Clay Frick, II, M.D.
Thomas L. Higginson
Lawrence S. Huntington
Henry H. Moulton
Robert S. Potter
Denie S. Weil
Edward F. Cunningham
Joseph P. Downer
Harry W. Fowler
Harry W. Havemeyer
Fred Hirschhorn, Jr.
George deForest Lord
Roswell B. Perkins
Landon Thomas
Eric F. West
E. Thomas Williams, Jr.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WILLIAM PARK AND GILBERTO PEREZ

The Madwoman in the Loft: *Fatal Attraction*

PLATITUDINOUS AND FREAKISH, BLAND AND REVOLTING, a film directed in the glossy, shallow, speedy style of a television commercial that stalls unless revved up, *Fatal Attraction* is an implausible melodrama of adultery that has been doing sensationally well at the box office. It has aroused more discussion and commentary than any other recent movie; *Time* magazine and the *Village Voice* both put it on the cover. What attracts people to *Fatal Attraction*? Is it the old mixture of titillation and moralizing? The nude sex scene has become a convention on the screen these days; usually it's less titillating than the old fade-out during a kiss. A continuity error in *Fatal Attraction*—a woman's breasts naked in one shot and in the next suddenly covered by the bed sheet—indicates that the makers of this movie took nudity so much for granted as to pay it no more attention than they might have an ashtray present one moment and inadvertently gone the next. *Fatal Attraction* breaks no new ground in titillation, but it may be said to have brought back moralizing in the new context of fear of AIDS. The moralizing fear it evokes is perhaps the main reason for its popularity.

The husband in *Fatal Attraction* is the principally frightened character, a weak man, vain and ineffectual, afraid both of his wife and of the other woman; and yet the movie can be seen as upholding the traditional family under the authority of this feeble patriarch. The potent figures are the women—the wife wears the pants, the other woman wields the phallus—and yet the movie is not feminist but nastily misogynist. Not so much ambivalent or confused as manipulative and irresponsible, concerned not with meaning but with effect, this "nightmare parable of sex in the '80's" means, according to *Time* magazine, whatever one takes it to mean: "a Rorschach test for everyone who sees it," maintained one of its producers, disclaiming responsibility for what viewers make of the production. *Fatal Attraction* may not admit of coherent interpretation—it self-deconstructs—but this isn't the same thing as its being open to *any* interpretation.

A very wicked woman threatens a family of "decent" people: she pours acid on a Volvo station wagon, kills little Ellen's bunny rabbit and boils it in a pot, separates Ellen's parents, kidnaps Ellen (played by Ellen Hamilton Latzen) herself, and then, when the parents have reconciled, attempts to kill them both. This is little Ellen's film, in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which the House of Innocence or Temperance, besieged by a wild, unruly, and evil force, quells it at last, but not without a struggle. And the audience cheers, because, among other reasons, it never wants that little girl to cry again.

Hollywood makes dozens of stories like this annually; they may be seen every day on television. But *Fatal Attraction* offers much more. A second reading centers on the husband and father rather than the daughter. Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas) is a lawyer who breaks the law; he commits adultery. Of course he didn't mean to. At a publisher's party, he first meets the other woman, a book editor named Alex Forrest (Glenn Close), who has a mound of curly blond hair and who, when his wife beckons him to come home, says tauntingly, "Better run along." At work, Alex tactfully and flirtingly calls attention to the cream cheese on the tip of his nose. Afterwards she rescues him in the rain (he can't get his umbrella up), asks him if her preference for him makes him feel good, wonders if he is discreet, and declares with a smile that she's deciding whether or not to sleep with him. What's a man to do? She makes all the moves and promises him a bit of fun with no strings attached; he can resist anything but temptation. He has no complaints about his wife, Beth (Anne Archer), who is prettier than Alex, sweeter and sexier and, like a total woman, given to wearing around their apartment a T-shirt and bikini pants; but Beth is away for the weekend with Ellen, and Dan is seduced into a night of seemingly harmless betrayal that begins at Alex's kitchen sink. Certainly he has not been *driven* to stray: he lacks any of the justifications drama usually provides for adulterers, the frigid or castrating or unfaithful or in any way uncongenial or problematic wife. He errs because he thinks it's "adult." So the movie pits two sexual codes against each other, the casual sex of the liberated sixties versus traditional marital fidelity, and comes down heavily on the side of tradition. For Dan is punished, though he's slow to get the point.

At each stage of the escalation of violence, Dan tries to make a deal, a pact, with Alex. Lawyer that he is, he keeps expecting her to play by the rules. He leaves discreetly after their night together; she calls him back. "Bring the dog," she replies when he says he has to walk it. "I love animals. I'm a great cook." (No, she doesn't boil the dog.) After spending the day with her, he says a polite good-bye; she kicks him. Her hands behind her back as he's about to leave, she is, we fear, going to attack him with a knife, but her weapon is her own blood; she has slashed her wrists; he remains. Later, when she visits him in his office, he gives her a friendly embrace of farewell; she proceeds to phone him incessantly, first at the office and then at home. Whether the caller is she or anyone else, he is besieged by the unnerving ringing of the phone. He agrees to meet her and, at a subway station where a poster in the background announces a "glorious beginning," she tells him she is pregnant. He offers help for an abortion; she insists on having the child. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

changes his number to an unlisted one; she comes to the apartment. He beats her; she kills the bunny. He confesses his infidelity; she kidnaps Ellen. He nearly strangles her; she retaliates with a knife. He wrests it from her and, oddly, maybe proposing another deal or pact, leaves it for her on her kitchen sink; she wields it into the bathroom in his home and tries to kill his wife. Once Dan succumbs to Alex's seduction at the restaurant where they come in from the rain, he never regains control of himself or his life. In the end, it is his wife, crippled in a recent accident, who must save him from Alex. The true cripple is of course Dan.

Like most villains in melodrama, Alex is the chief instigator of the plot, an author within the story who attempts to carry out her script. Originally the film had a different ending that was according to Alex's script. In that ending, changed by the producers because of adverse reaction from preview audiences, she killed herself with the knife, on which she made sure to leave Dan's fingerprints, thus framing him for her own death: she succeeded in destroying him while destroying herself. That ending made more sense psychologically, for Alex, insofar as she exists as a character rather than a monster—and she exists as a character mostly owing to Glenn Close's commendable performance in a part that is a figment of male paranoia—has the personality of one sexually abused as a child, and is much more likely to do violence to herself than to others. The film with its original ending was a duel between Dan and Alex, hero and villain, that the villain won. In the film as it stands Dan is no longer the hero but, in effect, the damsel in distress, rescued at the last minute by the hero that is his wife.

The punishing agent in Dan's life and a woman with a masculine name, Alex becomes associated with the castrating father. Her own father—who taught at *Ball* State—may have abused her. She oddly lies to Dan about him. Already at the restaurant Dan speaks to her disparagingly of *his* father. Fred Gwynne, an outsize actor identified with a monster father—Herman Munster—was picked for the bit part of senior partner in Dan's firm. When Alex appears in Dan's office, she sits under a stern male portrait of, presumably, the firm's founder. When she plays arias from *Madame Butterfly* in her loft, Dan remarks that the only time he remembers his father being kind to him was when he took him to this opera, to which Alex also tries to take him and which, in the original ending, was the accompaniment to the suicide by which she destroyed him. In the film with its present ending these threads don't knit together, but the association of Alex with the bad father who would bring the son down in the world contributes to our sense of Dan's inadequacy.

The villain in melodrama, the author within the story, is an incarnation of the devil, while the author of the story assumes the role of God. The devil in *Fatal Attraction* is an assured professional woman, well educated, autonomous, empowered, in control of her space, a woman who has not a room but a loft of her own. She would seem

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to be the fulfillment of a feminist dream, a far cry from the "madwoman in the attic," that recurring figure of nineteenth-century fiction who represented the stunted creativity and thwarted professional ambition of women suffering under a patriarchal society, the madwoman as depicted by Charlotte Brontë. But the spiteful and mean-spirited male God who created Alex—the script of *Fatal Attraction* was by James Dearden, the direction by Adrian Lyne—has made her not just contradictory and neurotic but deranged, criminally psychopathic, the madwoman in the loft, a figure presented with much less sympathy than Hitchcock gave to Norman Bates in *Psycho*. Hellish fires seem always to encircle the building in Tribeca where Alex has her loft: the city evidently belongs to the devil, and Dan and his family are moving to a house in the suburbs. Father, mother, child, and bunny rabbit: when Alex watches them through a window, a picture of the happy family in their new suburban home, she throws up. Yet she wants to take the wife and mother's place in that family. With him or without him she will have the baby, she tells Dan adamantly, and she calls him a faggot; but as adamantly she wants to possess him, to be part of his life, and she keeps rebuking him for not taking responsibility as father of the child she carries. On the one hand she would coerce him into sharing their mutual burden, and on the other she asserts her independence: she mouths the two contradictory attitudes of feminists toward men, but her actions accord with neither. By making the feminist ideal horrible, something from a slasher movie, and by hysterically dramatizing its contradictions, *Fatal Attraction* reasserts patriarchy and puts the aspiring female right back into the position depicted by Charlotte Brontë. It is crazy to want a career, and if you attain it, not only will you be "mad," you'll be beaten and killed by the man you love, or his good wife, your better self, that part of you that has not strayed from conventional wisdom.

Given this reading, one would expect Beth, who is indeed made in every way preferable to Alex, to exist simply as the good wife and mother in contrast to the wicked and insane career woman. After Dan has failed to drown Alex in the bathtub, Beth saves her husband and her family by shooting the murderous intruder in the heart, like a vampire. ("The family that kills together stays together," wrote Pauline Kael.) The woman Beth kills in the bathroom, however, is no mere wicked psychopath but a *pregnant* woman—can anyone recall a film in which the villain is a pregnant woman?—and in killing her Beth also performs the abortion that Dan has been advocating all along. Married for nine years, Dan and Beth have one child, who is five or six (both ages are given), a child who at first appearance might be a boy or a girl and who will have to do for both sexes because it seems clear that Dan and Beth will not have other children. One of the reasons Alex wants a baby is her feeling that, at thirty-six, she may not have another chance. When

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Beth, who is no younger, says to her husband, "I don't know how to tell you this," it sounds as if she were about to inform him that she is pregnant, but instead she tells him that Ellen wants a rabbit, a rabbit Dan is disinclined to get until after Alex has informed him that *she* is pregnant. A fertility symbol and an important supporting actor in this drama, the rabbit surely stands for the displaced fertility of the wife.

This is a punishing film, and though Alex is most punished herself, Beth comes in for her share of punishment too. With the subtlety of a sledgehammer, the film cuts back and forth between Ellen and Beth as, on the family's return home from a visit to grandma, the child discovers the rabbit's empty cage and screams at the same moment that the mother sees the dead rabbit cooking on her range and screams. More subtly, this connects with the pot of coffee, the first thing we saw cooking, that was left percolating on Alex's range when Dan and Alex couldn't wait to make love—and conceived a child. By contrast, Beth's kitchen has no place for fertility: the cooking rabbit is an image of abortion. Besides threatening Dan's family, by striking at the rabbit Alex seems also to be expressing her own affront at his willingness to have pets but not children. Beth cries when Dan, alarmed at the grisly violation of his new suburban home and all too well aware of the culprit, confesses his infidelity, but she gets really angry and upset only when he adds that the other woman is pregnant, whereupon she throws him out of the house and he leaves meekly. In another bout of crosscutting, the film juxtaposes Alex, who has kidnapped Ellen and taken her to Rye Playland, and Beth, who frantically searches the streets of Mt. Kisco for her child. Alex does Ellen no harm, doesn't hurl her from the roller coaster as we fear, and returns her home with a kiss, but the distraught Beth suffers a car collision and ends up, badly hurt, in the hospital, where she and Dan become reconciled as her father looks on glumly. If the rabbit was a displacement for a baby and its boiling a kind of abortion, this is another displacement and symbolic abortion undergone by Beth at Alex's vengeful doing: as Dan would have Alex go into the hospital and lose her child, so Alex has Beth lose her child and go into the hospital.

Alex represents not only the threat of feminism to Dan and Beth's Yuppie marriage but also the threat of fertility. Beth has surrendered her fertility as well as her independence to the Yuppie version of the traditional family—a family that raises possessions rather than children. The two women—wife and other woman, hero and villain—may be regarded as doubles of each other: if Beth is Alex's "better" self, Alex is Beth's suppressed self, a specter of what Beth must deny in herself in order to be the requisite contained wife in an acquisitive one-child family. Alex needs to be destroyed, exorcised, because she has the power both of the successful working woman, competitive with men, and of the child-bearing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

woman, incomparable with men. No wonder the rancorous male creators of this potent female figure felt compelled to make her the devil.

In the figure of Alex, the madwoman in the loft, the makers of *Fatal Attraction* have invested a lot of fear: fear of sexual liberation and promiscuity in the valley of the shadow of AIDS, fear of the sixties and their experimentation in the age of Reagan and the Yuppie, fear of the city as an evil place, fear of the autonomous, liberated woman, fear of the mother and her children, even fear of the father. All this fear—pervasive, unshakable, unfocused, yet embodied in one character, a witch, a scapegoat—evidently has struck a nerve in the audience. "Alex is sick, not some predatory creature feeding on men," said the president of Paramount Pictures, the company that has been making a mint from this picture. "Yet at the end you hear the audience screaming, 'Kill her! Kill the bitch!' " This is to blame the audience for the response that the movie manipulatively elicits. Vulgar and slick, Adrian Lyne's direction can bring scenes to life only by applied hysteria—otherwise they go flat. James Dearden's script is clever, allusive, and rather witty in its perverse way; it gives the movie more social texture and subtext than any other thriller of recent years; but the movie fails to contain or resolve its materials, and cannot deal with the character of Alex and all that she represents except by killing her as a witch.

Images of water abound in *Fatal Attraction*: the rain, the kitchen sink, the percolating coffee, the blood washed from Alex's slashed wrists, the boiling rabbit, the bathtub. In dreams, Freud tells us, water symbolizes birth: "one falls into the water or one comes out of the water—one gives birth or one is born." Water in *Fatal Attraction* also symbolizes abortion—not being born. The bathtub in which Dan attempts to drown Alex is like a womb in which he would abort both the child she carries and Alex herself: she, it is implied, would have been better off not being born. She rises from the water with the knife—she wields the phallus *and* the womb—like some fetal monster that insists on being born, but is killed by a wife bent on aborting her. The wife acts in behalf of a family, a way of life, that not only wants Alex dead but wishes she had never come into existence. Alex is not just the other woman but the alien other, someone beyond the pale of Yuppie humanity and of this movie's capacity to imagine as a human being. As her body is carried off in a bag and a police officer talks to Dan at the door of the house, it's clear that neither husband nor wife will even be taken to the police station for questioning. Their marital happiness has been manifested throughout in their numerous family pictures, and the movie now closes on one such framed photograph—which one may or may not take ironically. Dan and Beth will not be the same again, one would like to say, but the worst of it is that they probably will.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HARRY GOLDGAR

The Bible under the Critic's Loupe

IN THE SECOND VOLUME OF THE *ENCYCLOPÉDIE* (1751), the irrepressible Diderot announces an elaborate writing project "qui renfermeroit tout ce qu'on peut desirer sur les questions préliminaires de la *Bible*." The second section of this work "seroit divisée en autant de petits traités qu'il y a de livres dans l'Ecriture: on en seroit l'analyse & la critique; on en éclairciroit l'histoire; on donneroit des dissertations sur les auteurs, les tems précis, & la maniere dont ils ont écrit."

Since that confident Enlightenment promise was made and unfulfilled, two and one-third centuries of Higher and Lower Criticism, of all manner of analysis, exegesis, interpretation, commentary—vast libraries of staggering erudition—have almost perversely ignored (with the possible exception of the attention that has been paid to Job and to Revelation) questions of *literary* quality, literary form, literary effect—what Diderot clearly intends by "la critique."

The Literary Guide to the Bible[1] aims to set to rights that neglect: it is a collection of critical essays on almost every book of the extremely heterogeneous anthology of writings known as the Old and New Testaments, with extra essays at the end on special topics like "Ancient Hebrew Poetry." Its editors underscore carefully the distinction they wish to make between the theological and the literary approaches. Here, for example, is Frank Kermode (one of the two overall editors as well as the author of several of the essays), writing on the Gospel of John:

> Although in certain historical respects John clearly differs from the other Gospels, and although one needs to take some account of this fact when studying his practice as a writer, such considerations affect the present essay only obliquely. Literary critics can reasonably avoid many of the arguments which orthodox biblical criticism cannot. There is, for example, a protracted discussion concerning which verses of the Prologue—a feature unique to John—are original, and which are interpolations. Literary critics may not feel disposed to substitute for the poem as it now stands some hypothetical predecessor that fits better their view on John's

[1]THE LITERARY GUIDE TO THE BIBLE, ed. by *Robert Alter* and *Frank Kermode*. Harvard University Press. $29.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> theology or his historical situation. They may attach much importance to the long existence of the Gospel in its present form and wish to see it in its immemorial contexts as a member of a set of gospels, as part of a Testament, and as part of the Bible. . . .

Kermode and his fellow essayists, "in deciding not to be hindered by this immensely powerful tradition of largely disintegrative commentary," hope, he goes on, "to regain some of the advantages of the precritical commentators who knew nothing about the Higher Criticism"—to arrange themselves, in short, in the attitude of a Diderot.

The editor of the Old Testament half of the book, Robert Alter (who points out that the term "Old Testament" assumes, as all Christians do assume, that the Old requires completion in the New, whereas "as a matter of literary history there is surely no warrant to imagine that the ancient Hebrew writers composed their stories and poems and laws and genealogical lists with the idea that they were providing a prelude to another set of texts, to be written in another language centuries later"), also presupposes that "the primary element that pulls the disparate texts together is literary," and that the Hebrew writers, whose narratives and poems have so often been patronizingly dismissed as "naive" and "folkloric," were sophisticated artificers, aware at every moment of exactly what they were doing.

The international team of biblical and literary scholars—Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish; American, British, Dutch, Spanish, and Israeli—who have collaborated in producing this ambitious volume naturally differ in their critical methods and emphases. Happily, none of the essays is corrupted by deconstruction, or semiotics, or Marx, or Freud, or any other fad of the moment. The majority approach seems to derive from the New Criticism, with its emphasis on the organic integrity of the text, modified by a mild infusion of Structuralism. In each essay, the text gets a close reading, attentive to its often innovative qualities of structure, language, style and strategy. The reader is expected to have read and remembered the biblical text, or to have it by him, and to possess a decent level of literary experience. If that one prerequisite is met, this book is admirably "user friendly."

The laconic style of the Hebrew Pentateuchal narratives—what Robert Alter calls their "narrative minimalism"—encourages critics to explore the "gaps," the implied and unstated. J.P. Fokkelman examines the structure of Genesis, its "play of differences and oppositions," its ingenious cycles of space and time, its artful paradoxes, its themes of initiation (of Abraham, of Jacob) and brotherhood ("a metonymy for the bond that links humanity"). Fokkelman's chapter on the dynamics of Exodus, where the covenant between YHWH and the chosen people achieves its "classic formulation," is equally sharp.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David Damrosch has the daunting task of demonstrating literary values in Leviticus, "composed largely of ritual ordinances which have warmed the hearts of few, if any." Arguing that, like much of the Bible, Leviticus uses literary techniques for nonliterary ends, Damrosch attempts to redeem the dry laws and codes of chapters 11-25 as "*anti*narrative," transforming the more usual narrative style of chapters 1-10 into a "symbolic order." The presentation of the Law—the "redemptive symbolic order"—in the Wilderness then makes of Leviticus "the very heart of pentateuchal narrative." That shows what a clever critic can tailor out of some very unpromising material.

Numbers, as James S. Ackerman interprets it, is a "sophisticated collage of diverse materials" rearranged as a literary work by priestly editors. Deuteronomy is identified by Robert Polzin as "a bird's-eye view of the entire history of Israel." Its point is that whatever God, Moses, or the narrator says (for these are the several points of view), Israel, "destined for disobedience, is going to receive a land it does not deserve." The fall of Jerusalem centuries later will then be, according to Polzin, the Deuteronomic history's great paradox.

In a brilliant linguistic and thematic analysis of Joshua and Judges, David M. Gunn defines the theme of the history somewhat differently: it is "the tension between human craving for security and the insecurity risked by allegiance and obedience to an imageless and unfathomable divinity." Joel Rosenberg, writing about 1 and 2 Samuel, has, of course, more "story" to work with, in the clashes of matchless characters like Samuel, Saul, David, and Absalom. His treatment of David's political calculations, of his domestic persona (where "there is much that is congenial to the Freud-instructed sensibilities of the modern reader"), and finally of "the political within the domestic" is riveting. Through the Samuel author's "skillful interweaving of complementary codes," he concludes, many thematic lines converge, until "both structurally and artistically, Samuel is the centerpiece of the Hebrew Bible's continuous historical account."

A more familiar statement of the central Deuteronomic tenet comes from George Savran, writing on 1 and 2 Kings: Israel's presence in the Land "derives from its covenantal relation with God, the breaching of which will result in the people's destruction and exile." Again there is an heroic protagonist, Solomon, and a central event, the building of the Temple; but there is a different unifying mechanism at work, that of oracle and fulfillment, "the narrator's primary means for expressing his understanding of the processes of history."

The prophetic books are no less literary works, though they may exhibit more of *ars celare artem.* Luis Alonso Schökel considers Isaiah a classical writer, "because of the distance he places between experience and the poem." In a delicate analysis of prosody and diction, Schökel demonstrates that Isaiah's book is anything but a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

congeries of "ecstatic, half-conscious, spontaneous outbursts." Jeremiah as well, as Joel Rosenberg makes plain, is not a jumble of fragments but a work which, when its chronology is unravelled, has a purposive structure of "continual reversal, deadlock, setback, and resurgence," thus capturing the "apparent aimlessness" of the prophet's career. Herbert Marks takes up the Twelve Prophets, where the frequent problem of "voice" is most prominent, since here even words within a verse, let alone separate sections, may be of different authors. He is especially interesting on the post-Exilic prophets' habit of borrowing randomly to form a "dense network of echo and allusion," and the relation of this trait to both Judaism's and Christianity's "obsession with a textual heritage."

A fascinating essay by James S. Ackerman on Jonah as satire is followed by Alter's on Psalms. Although these poems can be as far apart in time as Chaucer and Wordsworth, most have in common a traditional style, a familiar imagery, a conventional "envelope" structure, a few recurrent themes. But Alter's study of their cunning "verbal artifices" within these severe limitations is elegant. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are the subject of an essay by James G. Williams, particularly keen on the aphoristic language and "metaphoric play" of the proverbs and on the manner in which Ecclesiastes' Qohelet ("the Preacher") contradicts conventional proverbial Wisdom with the bitter truth of experience.

The literary problem of Job is its coherence, how and whether the prose, poetry, and speeches hang together. Moshe Greenberg's decision, like that of all the writers in this volume, is not to argue the infallibility of the text but to deal with the book as we have it. Thus the much-vexed problem of whether the young Elihu's speech "belongs" in the book is no problem: "The unconventional representation of youth outdoing age bespeaks the author of the rest of the poem, whose hallmark is subversion of tradition." The essay is splendid in its conclusion: "With its ironies and suprises, its claims and arguments in unresolved tension, the Book of Job remains the classic expression in world literature of the irrepressible yearning for divine order, baffled but never stifled by the disarray of reality."

For Francis Landy, the subject of the Song of Songs is not simply human love, but "the whole world as it is experienced or animated through love." Landy sees the Song as a reflection on the story of the Garden of Eden, through which we glimpse, "by the grace of poetry, the possibility of paradise." Next Jack M. Sasson shows that Ruth is a fable of "Israel's troubled relationship with God," and clarifies its puzzling legal tangles. Landy, again, explicates Lamentations as marking the "focal calamity of the Bible," the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., and incidentally as a model for the study of Hebrew metrics.

Sasson now returns with a delightful chapter on Esther as stylized farce, in the mode of the *Golden Ass* or *Candide*. (Shemaryahu Talmon, writing on Daniel, remarks that Esther is the only book of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hebrew Bible in which God is never mentioned.) Daniel, Talmon says, is more fiction, a "diaspora novel," based, like the Joseph story, on the type-plot of the successful exile. On the other hand, Talmon presents Ezra and Nehemiah as straightforward historiography, the only Hebrew books where the compiler's audience had immediate knowledge of the events reported. Talmon closes the Old Testament section with a discussion of 1 and 2 Chronicles, which "invite comparison with the great works of history known from the classical world."

The New Testament's audience was the Greek-speaking eastern Roman Empire. In one of the most stimulating of the general essays at the end of this book ("Midrash and Allegory," "English Translations of the Bible," and others), Helen Elson points out that it "represents the transformation of the Messiah of Scripture into a Greco-Roman culture hero." She analyzes the Gospels and Acts as intermingling two Greco-Roman literary genres, biography and romances. Hers is a quite different slant from that of Frank Kermode, who in introducing the New Testament section is concerned with the intimate literary relation of the Gospels to the Old Testament and with the evangelists' construction of a "realistic, historylike narrative in such an unusual way that they created a distinctive genre."

This does not mean, Kermode continues in his essay on Matthew, that Matthew is dependent on the Hebrew Bible in the same way that Joyce's *Ulysses* is dependent on the *Odyssey*. Matthew's first concern, he finds, is with Jesus' *exousia* (power, authority) as a fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Mark, on the other hand, according to John Drury, belongs to the "legends of heroes" class of folktale. Drury (and other essayists) stresses the eschatalogical world-view of early Christianity: "Mark lived among people who believed the timetable of another world to be pressing upon mundane time . . . , [in] its eventual triumph over ordinary time and the defeat of death. . . . by resurrection." With this key he superbly unlocks the "codes" of Mark's book of secrets. "The sky was split at Jesus' baptism, the Temple veil at his death."

Drury writes next about Luke's "definitive version" of the biography, which, reviving the antique style, contrasts with "the shock of the new" in Mark. "Are we reading a new Christian text or an old Jewish one? If we wonder, then Luke has succeeded." He shows how Luke's "horizontal" historicism contrasts with John's vertical movement. On the parables in Luke, Drury is wonderfully illuminating. Luke's achievement here, he says, is like "what Mozart did for opera with *The Marriage of Figaro*: a grand and basically mythical genre has been transposed into the complexities of the commonplace."

John, Kermode demonstrates in a close structural examination, is a "protonovelist," more delicate and more powerful a narrativist

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than the Synoptic evangelists. Yet each of the four writers makes narrative choices "not only for theological reasons but because this is the way stories get told."

James M. Robinson, writing about Acts, defines it as historiography written within certain Hellenistic conventions ("so Luke can shift from the Hellenistic Greek he normally writes into the ghetto Greek of the Septuagint . . . , to give a spiritual flavor—and authority"). But Robinson remarks that the "facts" in Acts are often more literary than historical, in the service of Luke's intention to make history rather than record it. "Luke was in a sense the first Christian politician," the first to realize that "Christianity must make its way in the world and do so on the world's terms."

The chapter on the Pauline epistles by Michael Goulder is almost entirely a close and lengthy analysis of style. For example, Goulder shows how certain doubtful letters must be Paul's on stylistic grounds. Gabriel Josipovici summarizes the focus of Hebrews as "the way Scripture confirms the events of Jesus' life and those events give meaning to Scripture." The epistle forces readers of Old Testament stories and events to ask themselves, "Is *this* what they were about? What they were *really* about?" Josipovici himself is unconvinced.

Bernard McGinn sees Revelation as "a cyclical presentation of visions repeating, or recapitulating, the same basic message of present persecution, imminent destruction of the wicked and reward of the just." He assigns it its place among Near Eastern apocalypses, a literature that "taps into the deep mine of myth in order to give meaning to history." He traces the complicated history of interpretation of Revelation, up to modern attempts to read the book as at once prophetic and scientific, and more recently to employ literary theory. But the conflict between academic readings and the mass of general readers "is probably greater now than ever before."

Of the seven general essays that conclude this book, the most remarkable to my way of thinking is "Fishing for Men on the Edge of the Wilderness," by the structural anthropologist Edmund Leach. To Leach "religious texts are concerned with the relationship between the physical world . . . and the metaphysical, dreamlike experience of the Other. . . ." His essay focusses upon initiation episodes in both Testaments, especially in the first twenty verses of Mark's Gospel and in the story of Moses in Exodus. The Wilderness, "the Other World of things sacred," is the "marginal state," the initiation setting; water and fish are other important elements.

Leach's essay is typical of the fresh and original approaches of all the writers in this extraordinary volume. It is not easy to say anything new about the Bible, but these essayists offer a cascade of new insights. The approach of the critic who is interested solely in literary quality represents a quite recent movement in biblical studies. This book, the first to bring that movement to the general reader, is a superb guide.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEAN FLOWER

In the House of Pain

> He has seen but half the universe who has never been shown the house of Pain. Pleasure and Peace are but indifferent teachers of what it is life to know.
>
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson[1]

I AM REMINDED OF EMERSON'S RESONANT WORDS having just finished Richard Ford's grim and beautiful collection of stories.[2] What lifts them above the ordinary—perhaps what lifts *any* serious fiction out of the realm of the merely "talented," "skillful," and "fresh"—is the way they bring us into the house of pain. Ford is an authority on that place, a moralist. One of his characters, a boy who has just seen his family collapse, tries to think why such things can happen: "Possibly . . . it is just low-life, some coldness in us all, some helplessness that causes us to misunderstand life when it is pure and plain, makes our existence seem like a border between two nothings, and makes us no more or less than animals who meet on the road—watchful, unforgiving, without patience or desire." Ford seems to have elicited his theme from bleak wintry Montana landscapes, isolated trailer parks and farmhouses along rutted roads, and from dingy bars and rented rooms. But the failures in each story are all human: a man trying to make a fresh start in life steals a car, trying to manage his girlfriend, his daughter, and a dog; a man about to give himself up to the police tries to find solace with his ex-wife; two men argue and an angry punch disintegrates the lives of five people. Failure is the norm here: infidelity, divorce, joblessness, temporariness. Ford never asks that we pity these characters, never taints his lawbreakers with any glamor, never allows domestic trouble to become melodrama. His style is plain, frontal. He has perhaps learned his austerity from Hemingway, but he does not believe in submerging feelings. Here is a typical first sentence: "All of this that I am about to tell happened when I was only fifteen years old, in 1959, the year my parents were divorced, the year when my father killed a man and went to prison for it, the year I left home and

[1] Twenty-nine years ago Emerson's words were quoted in these pages by Newton Arvin in what has become one of the best-known and most often reprinted essays in the history of *The Hudson Review*: "The House of Pain: Emerson and the Tragic Sense" (Vol. XII, No. 1, Spring 1959). Now seems an appropriate moment to quote them both again.

[2] ROCK SPRINGS, by *Richard Ford*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $17.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

school, told a lie about my age to fool the Army, and then did not come back." Ford is not the minimalist writer some critics have taken him to be. He is closer to Thomas Hardy than Raymond Carver. He resists the tempting rhetoric of abrupt ends, and lets his characters mull over their losses. Nor does he lock his stories into the usual continuous present. In the longest and perhaps best story, "Empire," there are two long flashbacks which constitute the protagonist's memories of guilty desire and infidelity. He is on a train with his wife asleep in a nearby roomette, remembering an episode of random sex and about to commit another. Ford doesn't ask us to sympathize or condemn, only to listen to how these characters think. "Life's on so thin a string anymore," one of them says. "Not that much makes it good." "This is the devil calling," says another. "Everybody's a loser today." When the protagonist of "Empire" gets back to his wife, ashamed and confused, she says—not knowing what he's done—"We're out on a frontier here, aren't we, sweetheart? It feels like that." How right she is. Despite brief moments of grace, Ford's stories tend to confirm a sense of inexorable meanness at work in the world.

The house of pain in Joyce Carol Oates's latest novel is located in Dreiserian style: "She lived at 118 East Clinton Street in Port Oriskany, New York, the east side of the city near the railroad yards and warehouses and the big factories along the lake—General Motors, U.S. Steel, Stubb Central Foundry, Swale Cyanamid."[3] Oates has emphatically returned, after a lengthy sojourn in gothic dreamlands, to the gritty naturalistic world she handles best. *Marya: A Life* (1985) began the metamorphosis, and her latest novel confirms it. Its protagonist is a fifteen-year-old named Enid Maria Stevick who commits suicide in the first few pages. We then go back to 1944 to learn about her dismal family and how she began growing up in a working-class, illiterate, wrong-side-of-the-tracks neighborhood of Port Oriskany (for which read Buffalo). The central action of the novel is Enid's secret affair with her father's half brother, Felix. When Enid's suicide attempt fails, after 135 pages of suspense, that action begins in earnest: an angry, desperately carnal passion between two people incapable of love. Felix is a loner, mean and cynical, a tough kid who boxed his way to fame and now gambles and speculates in Mafia-related deals. Oates seems to know this character inside out, whether he's running stoplights or beating up punks. When asked why be a prizefighter, he says "Why fuck? Because it feels good." A real prince.

Felix has enough pride to be ashamed of abusing Enid, but not enough to stop. What prolongs it for both of them—what made it possible in the first place—is secrecy. Enid hides her thoughts in a coded diary; her suicide attempt is covered up; only one sister

[3] YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS, by *Joyce Carol Oates*. E. P. Dutton. $19.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

comes near to guessing about Felix; even when she has an abortion at the end nobody finds out. But then, *everybody* in this family hides, covers up, represses, denies. Enid's father is crushed by a humiliating arrest during the McCarthy era when somebody claims he's a Communist. Lyle is already downtrodden, a dealer in used furniture who has five children and no hopes. After his release he gets a noose ready and almost commits suicide. Most of the major characters come upon the notion of suicide, not as self-pity or consolation or dramatic assertion but as an unconscious recognition of emptiness and futility. It is a function of their anxious familial repressions. Oates's least convincing character, older brother Warren, explains this: "Strange isn't it—how 'love' seems to carry with it no knowledge. The people I have loved most in my lifetime . . . I haven't known at all. Nor have they known me." But the idea works better when left implicit, as it is for example when Jo Jo Pearl, a young prizefighter Felix is promoting, gets battered to death in the ring without ever realizing anything more important than "getting to the top" and "being the best." Oates writes superbly about boxing.

She also makes a concerted effort to document her era, working in the Rosenbergs, radio programs like "Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons," Johnnie Ray's "The Little White Cloud that Cried," Arthur Godfrey, bomb shelters, Adlai Stevenson losing to Ike, and much more. You *must* remember this? says the title, taken from the song in *Casablanca*. Some readers will, enjoying the nostalgia. But Oates doesn't really seize upon this material as say Dos Passos or Bellow would. She just mentions most of it, which undermines authenticity. Her tokens and emblems of the period feel second hand, rushed in to fill gaps. But what remains strong are the inarticulate longings of this divided family and its unacknowledged despair.

Toni Morrison's latest novel tells the story of a house too, and gives the address on the first page—124 Bluestone Road, outside of Cincinnati.[4] But she isn't interested in documentary evidence the way Oates is. Morrison proposes nothing less than imagining her way back into the sorrows and sufferings of a black family of more than a century ago. As one character puts it, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief." The story reconstructs two decades of family history after the Civil War, with frequent leaps backward still farther to bring in the antebellum era as well. It is a history warped by storytellers, by superstition, fable, and the distortions of rage and guilt. Morrison's protagonist is Sethe, an escaped slave living alone with her passive daughter Denver and her dying mother-in-law Baby Suggs. Haunted by the poltergeist of an infant daughter who was killed, the house is "full of a baby's venom." Sethe's two sons have already de-

[4] BELOVED, by *Toni Morrison*. Alfred A. Knopf. $18.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

camped. Nobody goes near the place. Then Paul D. arrives, a man she might have married back in the old slave days in Kentucky. He does some "screaming back at the screaming house," expels the demon, and tries to settle in as husband and father. But the ghost-baby takes a new form: twenty-year-old Beloved appears, an eerie might-have-been daughter and sister, who has uncanny knowledge of Sethe's past and a hundred peremptory needs. Beloved must be fed, must be obeyed, must be loved. The plot of the novel is to discover what energies in Sethe, Denver, and the past have given Beloved her monstrous powers and how she may be appeased.

More than one fable is at work here. The central one is that Sethe's anguished personal history—beatings, rape, humiliations, separation: a blameless history of victimizations—still makes her guilty. Her frustration and rage once made her murderous and twisted her love into hate. Now her grief at this self-betrayal is nearly irresolvable. Beloved represents that unbearable history, of love and failure to love. As in *Song of Solomon* Morrison is less interested in the white world's crimes than in the self-estrangements and moral confusions engendered by those crimes in black people. Another fable here, however, is quite different. Sethe's liberation from slavery is distinctively female and maternal: "Freeing yourself was one thing," she recognizes; "claiming ownership of that freed self was another." Morrison may be using contemporary feminism as a way to understand her whole maternal chattel-slave heritage. Or vice versa. She clearly sees it as a mother-daughter problem. Baby Suggs, for example, says, "A man ain't nothing but a man. But a son? Well now, that's *somebody*." But what does such an attitude make of a daughter except *nobody*, Morrison's story asks, and what does it make of those daughters who become mothers? Beloved in this context represents the denied female self, Denver's repressed double, Sethe's empowered and justified daughter, out to get revenge for being negated. Still another fable in this palimpsest is to see Sethe's "historical" family as a paradigm of a contemporary middle-class, not necessarily black, archetype: a burdened single mother, a daughter who feels unloved, and a missing father replaced by an uneasy stand-in who may cut and run. Looked at in this context Beloved represents the endless need for devotion that children seem to have a right to ask and that their parents seem always obliged to give.

Beloved is a rich, complex novel. It owes much to Faulkner's inquisition into slavery in *Absalom, Absalom* with all its interweaving of past and present, its stubborn ghosts and mythmaking narrators, and an irreducible mystery at the center. But Morrison goes about it in her own wonderful way. The story has any number of vividly realized scenes—a white girl discovering the awful wounds on Sethe's whiplashed back; Paul D. escaping with a chain gang in Georgia and freed by Indians; Denver smitten with love for Be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

loved. Yet in some ways the story disappoints, remains a sequence of puzzling but brilliant vignettes, fails to come together as a single action. *Song of Solomon* remains the better book. But Morrison's language has never been more supple, sensuous, and mysterious than this.

By contrast, Josephine Humphreys' novel seems a comedy.[5] It's another story of family disintegration, but told from the jaunty point of view of the seventeen-year-old Lucille Odom, who is trying hard to tough it out. Her mother has disappeared, her father is bewildered, her older sister has come home half-heartedly married and pregnant. Lucille takes it upon herself to cope, since she has what Huck Finn would call "the most *sand*." She makes a delightful narrator. "It's not hard to interpret the world," she says near the beginning. "I had recently learned to do it. You watch people and events and objects as closely as possible, then you put two and two together." She gets off many choice one-liners: "It is a good thing that human beings have hormones to drive them blind into marriage." Humphreys lives in Charleston, South Carolina, and has set her novel in a little shoreline community there, so one can hear some twang in the style. But Lucille is an original. Here she is marvelling at the "carpool mothers" speeding along in huge station wagons:

> Not even Richard Petty could outdrive them. I might see one rocket down the road at sixty-five, left elbow resting on the door, hand propping a tilted head, children tumbling in the car like laundry in a dryer.

Usually she affects a contempt for the conventional. In *her* school, she claims, Latin is "the only useful course."

Smart as she is, Lucille has a lot to learn about love and pain. She tries to fit her fragmented family back together again, even after she knows it cannot be done. "I began to see how a life can divide in two," she writes. "Like a little fox in the dark, with sharp teeth and claws, the secret life will gnaw and gnaw." Humphreys conveys the contradictions of Lucille's character—her bossiness and confusion, her stubborn resistance and quick understanding, her vulnerable arrogance—with a fine restraint. What lifts the novel above the merely skillful, however, is the way it confronts suffering. Through the comedy there is always sadness. Lucille learns her mother's history lesson: remember everything, especially the pain. "Nothing hurts as bad as they say it does. . . . And clear, pure memory doesn't hurt at all." Humphreys won the Hemingway PEN Award for her first novel, *Dreams of Sleep* (1985), and this one is even better. Anyone who has tried to wade through Gail Godwin's earnest attempts

[5] RICH IN LOVE, by *Josephine Humphreys*. Viking. $16.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at similar subjects, like her recent *A Southern Family*, should welcome Josephine Humphreys with open arms.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's latest novel—her tenth—makes it possible to view a similar theme with foreign eyes.[6] She tells the story of a decaying American family and its displacement by an exotic "family" of Indian royalty, the leaders of a world peace movement. The Americans, Michael and Harriet Wishwell, are about to come of age and inherit vast sums, but they have little use for the fine old Wishwell traditions (social reform, public service) and none for their divorced and weak-willed parents. The Indian group consists of a Maharishi-type called the Rawul, his apparent queen, the Rani, and their princely "son" Crishi. Full of talk about world peace, they descend on the Wishwell estate for an extended visit which becomes virtually a takeover. They are darkly beautiful, calm, and orientally voluptuous in contrast to the cold, white, nervous and rather ascetic Michael and Harriet. Scornful of American materialism and tradition, Michael and Harriet soon promise to donate their inheritance to the Rawul's cause. Idealism aside, they are both in love with Crishi. It becomes a rather Jamesian plot, of wealthy American innocence seduced by a glittering and corrupt Old World sophistication.

The story is narrated by Harriet, whose love for the sly Crishi blinds her to his every betrayal and manipulation. Michael too compromises all integrity, clinging to the illusion that the movement, "Transcendental Internationalism," justifies almost any chicanery and scam. For both of them Crishi embodies a dream of escape and fulfillment they cannot even articulate. But Crishi, Jhabvala's richest and most vivid figure, is utterly amoral. Charmingly voluble, endlessly adaptable and ingratiating, full of dazzling smiles and sympathetic feelings, Crishi abuses everybody and gets away with it. Harriet's narration makes this all the more convincing, especially the hypnotic spell of Crishi's erotic power. Yet there's a weakness in strategy here. Jhabvala relies too heavily on a narration of generalities, summaries, and explanations. And Harriet's voice tends to be too neutral, uninflected, and quiet. At first reading one longs for swifter action, more immediacy, a tightening of plot. But a second reading shows that Jhabvala has been much more detailed and precise than was apparent. And more ironic. She slips in conversations everywhere, especially in the middle of long paragraphs that look like pure exposition. The book is crowded with people, finely observed. If her tapestry sometimes dulls at the center, its breadth and richness of texture compensate.

The best section of this three-continent novel is the final Indian portion, "In the Rawul's Kingdom." The movement is now quartered in a modern Western-style hotel in Delhi, all elevators and air-conditioning and boutiques. Jhabvala offers scene after brilliant

[6] THREE CONTINENTS, by *Ruth Prawer Jhabvala*. William Morrow. $18.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scene of the clash of cultures, as all the illusions of world peace and transcendence unravel into politics and squabbling and squalor. Michael and Harriet relinquished their American houses in the hope eventually of living at the Rawul's remote palace in the mountains at Dhoka. But the palace, when in different ways they finally reach it, is empty, ruins in a desert, a house of pain and death.

Reversing the direction of Jhabvala's story, Martin Walser's latest novel puts the foreigner in an American house.[7] Helmut Halm, a luckless German professor, leaps at the chance to teach for a semester in California, on a fictive campus that might as well be Berkeley. Schooled in poverty and inhibition, Halm is bewildered by American freedoms, wealth, indulgences, and moral ambiguities. Outwardly deferential, Halm seethes inwardly with ironic criticism and questions, most of which he then directs against himself. Other people always come first for him, no matter how crudely selfish they may be. The novel brims with a bitter comic pathos. Narrated in the third person from Halm's point of view, the story is laden with epigrammatic asides, which must have made Leila Vennewitz's translation demonically difficult. The tone seems to shift sometimes with every phrase.

Escaping from a grim job and overbearing relatives in Germany, Halm finds that life doesn't necessarily improve because his new house has a panoramic view of sunsets over the Golden Gate Bridge. His wife's parents die, and he must respond to her grief. His daughter's gloom over a failed marriage hangs over the house even in America. His manuscript on Nietzsche is rejected, his lecture on Heine never happens, he falls victim to a pretty student in his German conversation class (he helps her write her English class essays), he buys some jazzy clothes which look grotesque, he takes up jogging and gets pummeled in the surf of the non-Pacific Ocean, wrenching his back. At the end Halm dreams of being bitten by the family dog who has just died, and the dog becomes the cat he had tried to befriend in America who becomes the student he tried to please. Halm ends by contemplating himself in the mirror, facing all his pains and deficiencies "with an indissoluble blend of dislike and satisfaction." It's an oddly exhilarating story, steeled with a fine-edged skepticism.

I confess to a growing impatience with fiction of a certain type usually written nowadays by men: novels so ridden by an idea that they fail to tell a human story. For recent examples we have James Dickey's *Alnilam*, which is 700 pages of inquiry into the notion of flying blind; Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines*, which degenerates into a collage of quotations about travel and possessing the land; and we have Frederic Buechner (*Brendan*), Gore Vidal (*Empire*), and T. Coraghessen Boyle (*World's End*) all straining to construct fabulous his-

[7] BREAKERS, by *Martin Walser*. Trans. by *Leila Vennewitz*. Henry Holt. $18.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

torical dramas in which they don't themselves believe. These are all greatly talented writers spinning their wheels. Refreshingly, Alexander Theroux doesn't do that.[8] His new novel tells the story of a painter's mad obsession with a confused and unhappy woman—the first instance I can think of in American literature of a *roman d'analyse*. Christian Ford, the artist, narrates every twist and curve of his long tortuous affair, as if to discipline himself with a self-punishing exactitude. It is not a happy story. Farol Colorado has great beauty, a heart-rending vulnerability, a dozen neurotic insecurities and contradictions. Christian is shrewdly self-aware, endlessly analytical, often angry and judgmental. While Farol is non-intellectual, married to an upper-middle-class businessman, Christian is unconventional, over-educated, and promised to an Italian girl in Boston whom he loves unquestioningly. At the moment he teaches at St. Ives, an expensive prep school in New Hampshire, and that is where he meets Farol and his agony begins.

Now all of this may sound like familiar material, but Theroux's voice and approach are new:

> I was in a way [says Christian] trapped into the belief that irony had meaning, convinced I couldn't live without her morally, that she was a lesson I had to learn, that her faults were precisely what I myself had personally to overcome in a matter that for so long had left us both so inextricably linked. It was positively as if the measure of each took sustenance by the treacherous growth between them in the subterfuge of adultery.

Note that Jamesian "positively" and the even more complex syntax of the following:

> She sought my understanding only until I showed it, and urging me to wish her well without the willingness to undermined her very own needs, for in the precarious state of our affairs when love meant allowance, allowance meant indifference and both meant failure.

That elevated language and straining for lucidity are symptomatic of Theroux's impulse to measure and moralize everything. With a narrator as interesting as that, he makes intelligence and feeling compatible in a way almost non-existent in American fiction of our century. Acknowledging a literary debt covertly, Christian writes "I saw on nearer view that Farol's elegance was intermittent, that her parts didn't always match." Of course Christian's capacity for analysis goes far over the head of his beloved. He's a student of paradox

[8] AN ADULTERY, by *Alexander Theroux*. Simon & Schuster. $18.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

so elaborate and nuanced that he loses his bearings in labryinths of his own construction. And as each construct disintegrates under the pressure of the next, Farol seems to grow more uncertain, more confused, more maddeningly nebulous. Frustration prods Christian into some savage satire on the dreariness of southern New Hampshire ("the state is literally *shaped* like a dunce cap," it has "the dumbest bumper sticker on earth—'This car climbed Mt. Washington,' " and "blackflies should be denominated the state bird"). He is also trenchant on the subject of three gossipy old women who know about his affair:

> They went into furious monopologues, criticizing behind their backs everyone they knew, getting hold of the larger doings of perhaps ten or twelve people and making them out to be national tendencies. Jumping to conclusions was the only exercise they ever got. They got offended when others talked while they were interrupting.

There is nothing funny, however, about the way the novel concludes. It's a story about the adulteration of feeling, the contamination of moral sense and personal integrity. Christian hardly knows who has more abysmally betrayed whom at the end. He has nowhere left to live but in the house of pain. But for us the experience is no trap. Theroux's art has pushed back the boundaries of what's possible. It's an extraordinary, liberating book.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

The Trouble with Ernest

KENNETH LYNN, AUTHOR OF THE LATEST AND BEST BIOGRAPHY of Ernest Hemingway, is Arthur Lovejoy Professor of History at Johns Hopkins University.[1] His field is American civilization, and he has published—among other works—a book on Mark Twain and an excellent, sympathetically critical biography of William Dean Howells. Latterly his criticism has become more polemical and programmatically unillusioned. A recent collection of essays and reviews, *The Air-Line to Seattle*, chastised the America professariat for what Mr. Lynn termed its capitulation to the "genteel tradition" (but now with a strong leftist bias) George Santayana had analyzed years ago. Not only did Lynn set himself against various critical and historical versions of American literature and culture, he also pushed for major reseeings of writers such as Emerson, the Twain of *Huckleberry Finn*, and, most radically, Hemingway. In the course of reviewing an unsatisfactory book on the last-named (Lynn was already at work on his own biography), he insisted that, contrary to popular legend, Hemingway was in fact a mama's boy, fearfully and destructively inhibited, "wounded" in a way quite other than had been assumed by the band of critics who—and with Hemingway's own encouragement of the myth—took his wounding at Fossalte di Piave in 1918 to be the source of later traumas, in his life and in his fiction.

The new biography is built on Mr. Lynn's conviction, developed and justified at length in the book's early stages, that Grace Hall Hemingway was (in Lynn's good phrase) "the dark queen of Hemingway's inner world," and that she reigned there for all his life. To simplify what Lynn goes into in extensive detail, it was Grace Hemingway's passion—and that is the word for it—to treat Ernest and his sister Marcelline as if they were twins, dressing them in look-alike outfits the first of which consisted of "crocheted bonnets, three-quarter length coats and ruffled dimity skirts that brushed their ankles." Photos taken of Ernest when he was three-and-a-half years old and his sister almost five, show them (in the mother's words) "always dressed alike, like two little girls"; at other times she dressed them as "two sturdy little chaps in overhauls." Grace also paid great attention to the hairstyles of—again in her words—"my two Dutch dollies," sometimes decreeing that long hair was in, sometimes the opposite. Indeed Lynn suggests that it was the arbi-

[1]HEMINGWAY, by *Kenneth Lynn*. Simon & Schuster. $24.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trariness and changeability of Grace's sartorial whims that confused the children, and in Hemingway's case hurt him in a major way.

If one is tempted—and I was immediately tempted—to scoff at this line of argument as making too much out of how some mothers dressed their children "back then," a reading of Hemingway's posthumous, editorially stapled-together novel *The Garden of Eden*, gives Lynn's case strength. For the puzzling and insistent fuss made in that book about confusion of sexual identity—especially in much tiresome gushing about the wife having her hair cut short, and dyed, so that she will be "like" the husband—makes sense (if it can be called that) only by seeing how deep the matter ran in Hemingway's psyche. Lynn gives us a way to view this matter and to understand why Hemingway's hatred for Grace—"that bitch," as he loved to refer to her—needed to be worked at full-time, took up enormous psychic energy. Not of course that it was "just" hate. He loved the fact that his mother was proud of him for having been wounded in action (he was in an ambulance unit of the Red Cross) and wrote to her that "When a mother brings a son into the world she must know that some day the son will die, and the mother of a man that has died for his country should be the proudest woman in the world and the happiest." This absolute capitulation to Gold-Star Mom boosterism is merely the other, saccharine side of his nastiness toward her. Like all tough babies, Hemingway was consistently sentimental and cruel by turns, even at once; Lynn's biography misses no opportunity to detail instances of such behavior.

At one point in the book, just before taking up Hemingway's years in Paris, Lynn steps back to give us the following summary of how he imagines his subject's inner life to have been shaped:

> To be a boy but to be treated like a girl. To feel impelled to prove your masculinity through flat denials of your anxieties (*Fraid a nothing* had been your motto as a child) and bold lies about your exploits. To be forced to practice the most severe economy in your attempts to "render" your life artistically, because your capital of self-understanding was too small to permit you to be expansive and your fear of self-exposure too powerful. To make a virtue of necessity by packing troubled feelings below the surface of your stories like dynamite beneath a bridge.

One could object to this account for the way it turns the writer wholly into the passive agent of his sexual or familial curse, the famous Hemingway style reduced to nothing more than the result of being "forced" to practice economy in the writing of sentences and paragraphs. The brilliant discovery we had thought he made, about how by leaving things *out* of the writing it could be made the more suggestive and troubling, now becomes nothing more than the consequences of minimal self-understanding—this man didn't know himself well enough to let things hang out.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Freudian" understandings or explanations of how writers got to produce the art they produced—after which the art itself can be dismissed, or at least put in its place—should be treated with impatience or worse. What makes Lynn's dealings with Hemingway something other and better than such non-esthetic procedures, is that he cares about Hemingway's art (especially his early stories and first two novels) but also sees how very odd is that art, how little it invites us to see it as the result of thoughtful, "objective" planning. If all writers could be said to be in the grip of their gift—or their beast—Hemingway was in its grip more than most; he is less likely to be distorted by an approach such as Lynn's, since the distortions, the twists in his art, are so apparent and inescapable.

At the same time, there are at least two American writers whose work yields richer satisfactions and pleasures than Hemingway's and whose biographers, committed to elaborate psychological explanations of their subjects, manage to tell us very little by way of locating and describing the literary value of their work. I am thinking of Leon Edel on Henry James and Lawrance Thompson on Robert Frost. Both biographers relentlessly wielded a theory about how their subjects came to arrive at their respective inner landscapes; both biographers were helpless before the novels or poems which somehow emerged from that landscape. (Edel contented himself with telling plots and identifying this or that "real-life" character source; Thompson quoted a poem and found it illustrated one or another "dark" tendency in the poet's makeup.) It almost seems that the very intentness with which these biographers fix on a scheme that explains everything, debars them from anything like flexible, critical attention to the poem or novel in question—they are so busy showing how the example confirms their theory that they have no time to listen to what and how it speaks. Kenneth Lynn is a much better critic than either Edel or Thompson; but Hemingway, while not the equal of James or Frost as a writer, was surely—at least in his early stories and novels—a stylist of great delicacy ("a very considerable artist in prose-fiction," wrote Wyndham Lewis, before proceeding to make fun of that artist's fondness for his "Dumb-ox" heroes). Hemingway's style still presents a challenge to criticism and is why one keeps returning to him in the classroom, where passages can be read aloud and pondered. In the light of this challenge, let us consider Lynn's treatment of three of Hemingway's very best stories from *In Our Time*: "Indian Camp," "Soldier's Home," and "Big Two-Hearted River."

In the first of these, the boy Nick goes with his father and his Uncle George to an Indian shanty where Nick's father, a doctor, performs a caesarean section on an Indian woman (he performs it with a jacknife and then sews up the incision with gut leaders for sutures); meanwhile her husband, as she screams, slits his own throat from ear to ear with a razor. Afterwards, rowing home in their boat, Nick questions his father about death and whether many

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

men and women kill themselves. Lynn says that beyond the obvious "autobiographical emotion" in the boy's feelings of closeness with his father and dislike of his uncle's sarcasm (there was a real Uncle George Hemingway), the story's major inspiration comes from emotions generated by the circumstances of Hemingway's recent fatherhood. Living in Toronto, and a reporter on the *Star*, he had returned to town from a news assignment to find a telegram saying that his wife, in labor, had been taken to the hospital; at this news he became distraught with fear and a sense of helplessness (though in fact the birth went smoothly enough). Lynn argues that the terrified-to-death Indian in the story is a "symbolic equivalent of Hemingway":

> When the Indian slits his throat, he acts out the thought of suicide to which Hemingway had made reference in his letter to Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas after Hadley and the baby came home from the hospital. The probability that in describing the awful fate of the Indian Hemingway achieved catharsis is evident in the story's final moments of peace.

And he adds that, of course, we can't help thinking of how the real-life counterparts of both Nick and his father would one day do away with themselves.

All this may well be so, but is it—especially the developed parallel between Hemingway and the Indian husband—what we really care about in "Indian Camp"? Lynn rightly calls the story "a miracle of verbal compression," but his analysis does little to suggest how that miracle is shaped, concerned as it rather is with such matters as "symbolic equivalents." The story concludes with two magical paragraphs in which Hemingway's touch has never been surer:

> They were seated in the boat, Nick in the stern, his father rowing. The sun was coming up over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning.
>
> In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die.

Here is the style at its purest and most compelling, and nothing Lynn says about the parallels or "The probability . . . that Hemingway achieved catharsis" can touch it. To be sure, his commentary avoids the crudities of ham-fisted interpretations of "Indian Camp" like Philip Young's ("an initiation . . . an event which is violent or evil, or both") or Judith Fetterley's ("a story of initiation . . . a lesson in the meaning of growing up male in America").[2] But a really relevant comment on the style would have to speak about the beautiful

[2]Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (University Park, Pa., 1966), p. 31; Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington, Ind., 1978), p. 46.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sequence of the father rowing, the sun coming up over the hills, the jumping bass, the boy trailing his hand in the water and feeling it warm in the morning's sharp chill. Hemingway would have approved of Frost's assertion that poetry was "performance and prowess and feats of association," since, in a passage like the one above, he was so good at those things. And he might also have sympathized with Frost's question: "Why don't critics talk about those things?" Lynn does, but not enough; he may believe that such notations are the reader's business, or he may have other—in his opinion more important—fish to fry.

"Soldier's Home" presents, in Lynn's words, "a face-to-face conflict between mother and son, on a battlefield that was normally off-limits to the fictive imagination." The conflict occurs over fried eggs with bacon and a stack of buckwheat cakes, cooked for the come-home soldier, Harold Krebs, by a mother who has designs on him, wants him to think about earning his living, reminds him that there can be "no idle hands in His Kingdom." Krebs denies that he's in that Kingdom and when his mother asks him whether he doesn't love her, says no, he doesn't love anybody. He then tries to apologize, and after the mother tells him that "I held you next to my heart when you were a tiny baby," Krebs (Hemingway writes) "felt sick and vaguely nauseated." Since she has made him "lie," he determines to head out soon for Kansas City. Lynn rightly calls this finale "excruciatingly painful," but also insists that "the utterly unrelenting, utterly unqualified characterization of Mrs. Krebs as a monster" reveals Hemingway to be in thralldom to his real mother: "Only a man who was truly free could have seen that she had done her best to be a good mother, that she had not meant to harm her son and that she, too, had been tossed about by psychological impulses she did not understand." Is there not something odd about this suddenly generous attitude on the biographer's part toward Grace Hemingway? After all, it is Lynn who has spent so much devoted energy demonstrating how she warped her son's character; now the son is blamed for lack of understanding, and Hemingway's fictional characterization of Mrs. Krebs as a "monster" seen to reflect at least as much discredit on the writer as on the poor mother. If I'm going to agree that Hemingway was not "truly free," I need to be told what writer was or is. At any rate, and Lynn would I think agree, a "freer" writer, dispensing more even-handed justice, could not have achieved the partial, simplifying, but absolutely memorable force of "Soldier's Home."

Finally, "Big Two-Hearted River," which Lynn is concerned to rehabilitate by first demolishing the notion that Nick Adams goes fishing in order to block out his memories of being wounded in the war. That notion—encouraged by Hemingway in a letter of 1948 to Malcolm Cowley ("I was hurt bad all the way through and I was really spooked at the end")—Lynn sees as a cover for the real hurt occasioned by Grace, who in 1920 had told him off in a scorching (and quite eloquent) letter expelling him from their summer place.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Why then, in the story, is Nick so preoccupied with holding off upsetting memories? Lynn speculates as follows:

> Perhaps . . . the "other needs" Nick feels he has put behind him include a need to please his mother, while his talk of his tent as his home may represent a reaction to being thrown out of his parents' summer cottage. Perhaps, too, the burned-over country and the grasshoppers that have turned black from living in it constitute tacit reminders to him of his mother's penchant for burning things. And finally, the activity of his mind that keeps threatening to overwhelm his contentment could be rage.

In life, surely, these "could" be, but in Hemingway's art there are no coulds or perhapses. Lynn seems to agree when in the next paragraph he admits that "First and last, Nick remains an enigma," then goes on to castigate critics who account for him by adducing—with his creator in mind—the First World War as culprit.

But does talking about Hemingway's mother put us in any closer touch with the rhythms and sensations so marvellously present in "Big Two-Hearted River"? Here is Nick, having settled into his camp, cooking his dinner:

> The beans and spaghetti warmed. Nick stirred them and mixed them together. They began to bubble, making little bubbles that rose with difficulty to the surface. There was a good smell. Nick got out a bottle of tomato catchup and cut four slices of bread. The little bubbles were coming faster now. Nick sat down beside the fire and lifted the frying pan off. He poured about half the contents out into the tin plate. It spread slowly on the plate. Nick knew it was too hot. He poured on some tomato catchup. He knew the beans and spaghetti were still too hot . . . He was very hungry. Across the river in the swamp, in the almost dark he saw a mist rising. He looked at the tent once more. All right. He took a full spoonful from the plate.
>
> "Chrise," Nick said, "Geezus Chrise," he said happily.

This fine moment is poised on the edge of the stylistically ludicrous ("He liked to open cans," runs a neighboring sentence). But so much of Hemingway's writing is poised there—the crafty, "dumb" sentences, the minimal verbs, the repetitions that appeal to our ears while suspending our urge to find "meanings" in them. Hemingway's low-mimetic, "noble" style is but an inch away from the bathetic: think of how similar is the prose in his travesty *The Torrents of Spring*, to "pure" moments in the stories like the one above. (Yogi Johnson or Scripps O'Neill from *Torrents* could surely rise to the degree of articulateness Nick reaches with his happy "Geezus Chrise.")

"No one who looks *at* it, will want to look *behind* it," said Wyndham Lewis about Joyce's *Ulysses*. But from the beginning, those who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have looked at Hemingway's sentences felt they needed to look behind them for a significance not found on their surface; it all began with Edmund Wilson finding that Hemingway's "naivete of language" served "actually to convey profound emotion and complex states of mind." But what is the force of "actually," and why should we presume that behind the simple language lies profundity and complexity, or even states of mind?[3] Are we justified in moving from Hemingway's troubled psyche in order to endow his characters and his fiction with a similar set of feelings? Or is it all the magnificent stunt of an illusionist, casting his spell over us for as long as the story takes to tell? Despite his acumen and conviction, I don't think Lynn deals enough with such matters, since—committed to his "strong" interpretation of what lies behind or underneath Hemingway's writing—he neglects to look sufficiently *at* that writing.

In spending so much time discussing (niggling at?) Lynn's reading of some of Hemingway's best work, I have of necessity left most things in the biography untouched. My partial excuse here will be that Frederick Crews has treated the book at great length—and accorded it the highest praise—(in "Pressure Under Grace," *New York Review of Books*, August 13, 1987). But among its aspects I found particularly illuminating were the pages on *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, especially the earlier novel which Grace Hemingway called "one of the filthiest books of the year" and whose publication, she opined, was "a doubtful honor." (There's nothing like having your mom in your corner!) Lynn gives a brilliant account, by far the best I've read, of Hemingway's relations with the Scott Fitzgeralds. And there are original, sharply-turned, revisionary readings of famous stories like "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." Of course any biographer's problem with Hemingway is that after 1930 everything begins to go downhill: the novels get worse, the stories dry up, the behavior becomes more horrendous. Then there is the prodigious drinking to be chronicled, testified to, for example, in Hemingway's "regular Sunday hangover letter" (to his editor, Max Perkins, in 1940) which fills out the scorecard for the previous night's journey from absinthe to red wine to vodka to having "battened it down with whiskys and soda until 3 a.m." Concurrent with the drinking, there were the physical injuries, accidents, and general bodily deterioration. The unpleasant story of it all is told here with thoroughness and some compassion. I think it fair to say that—for all the heavy interpretive artillery directed at Hemingway's psyche, Lynn does not end up, as have some biographers, more or less hating his subject. At one point he quotes Norman Mailer's assertion about Hemingway that "what he accomplished was heroic, for it is possible that he carried a weight of anxiety with him which would have suffocated any man smaller than himself." Lynn's book allows us to follow the accomplishment in detail, indeed see it clearly for the first time.

[3]The most astute criticism of Hemingway's style—it is almost the only one—is to be found in James Guetti's *Word-Music* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980), pp. 139–149.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JAMES FINN COTTER

The Voice of Poetry

DOES POETRY HAVE A VOICE? Not different voices. We all know poets by their voices as we know painters by their styles. But is there a voice that is poetry's itself, a word within the word, a dancer in the dance? Every reader of poetry knows the answer is *yes*. That is why we read old and new poets, to hear that voice, to listen to its rhythms, watch the color of its images, the shifting of its meanings. *This* is a poet. We rejoice in the encounter and, like Gerard Hopkins, can exclaim: "I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand."

In "The Ridge Farm" from his latest collection of poetry, *Sumerian Vistas*,[1] A. R. Ammons describes a conversation with a poet who gives him a poem with the comment, "this is not my true voice, only a / line or so." Ammons reflects that this poet wants "to write by the voice" rather than "to say what you have to say / and let the voice find itself / assimilated from the many tones and sources." In his own poetry, Ammons is as concerned about letting this voice speak as he is about uncovering it in nature and in himself. In wind and brook we may imagine words of our own making, but nature says nothing because "it has nothing to say." Knowing and speaking arise as necessities in us to be engaged in the process of sun and season, living and dying, motion and rest. The universe around us is dissolving; trees, plants, and people return to earth. A mole drowned in a watering can or a squirrel hit by a car provoke the poet to honest descriptions of dissolution and equally honest reflections. Tombstones carry names chiseled in stone; poems are words on paper. Something endures:

> the wind roars, sweeps, whirls,
> nearly free even in its calms,
> and the wind carries leaves, sand,
> seed, whatever: rain pours,
> puddles, flows: the ground
> yields to this or that pull, break,
> flush: among the swirling
> motions, the stone's slow swirl
> keeps the name
>
> "Tombstones"

[1] SUMERIAN VISTAS, by *A. R. Ammons*. W. W. Norton. $15.95; $7.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In time, the names will "rise out of stone" and disappear. Like the poet's words they catch the swerve and glint of an existence before departing, they say what they can, and they live on in memory. Ammons is a religious poet with a transcendental bent, but with his own stance and creed. In "The Dwelling," he asserts:

> I would as soon believe
> in paradise as in
> nothing: it is no great
>
> wonder that our spiritual
> energy, purified, returns
> to, is, the eternal
>
> residence: no greater
> wonder than that earth is
> here at all:

The poet has no quarrel with the deity: "here the plainest / majesty gave us what it could." With a neat twist, he makes faith itself the veil that separates us from divinity: "belief's a fine cloth: / a sheen before the eyes." Ammons' vision is one of gleams and glimpses, motions that curve, spin, and angle. His most explicitly philosophical poem, with echoes of an Omega point where everything converges and emerges, is titled "Pots and Pans." He pins down generalizations and domesticates ideas. His voice is not imitative but adaptive and adoptive. Each poem pursues a new venture into the knowable and sayable. Out of disorder, the poet seeks a pattern: like the catbird that pecks at a stone in a brook, "breaking the reflective surfaces with / mishmashes of tinkling circlets" ("The Ridge Farm"). By indirections find directions out.

No poet is fortunate enough to find the voice of every poem. Ammons can be obtuse in avoiding the obvious, so reticent that he risks retiring from his own lines. He wants to describe a scene and disappear into it. His ideal poem is total silence. In his fullest experience, he finds nothing there. What about the reader? May he or she feel left out—even be left out? Ammons appears aware of the problem, but that risk lies in the nature of the venture, the zen of his poetry. He makes even his faults work for him; stumbling at times he makes his way ahead.

In his first book of poems, *Little Star*,[2] Mark Halliday seems eager to get things off his chest, and poetry is his least concern. His voice is that of the standup monologist whose asides are more pointed than his main topic. Halliday writes like a sixties dropout whose nostalgia for rock and relevance fills his days. In the title poem, he

[2] LITTLE STAR, by *Mark Halliday*. William Morrow. $7.95p.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

recalls the Elegants and "the golden liquidity of the lead singer's voice." Ironically, he cannot remember the singer's name and offers six dollars to anyone who can. Despite the dopey gesture, Halliday is no dope. He has a doctorate from Brandeis and teaches English at the University of Pennsylvania. His is the voice of the Hucks and Holdens who refuse to grow up. "Venus Pandemos" asks "What am I going to do with my desire / for women?" He finds their bodies "terrific," but balks at belonging to "Hugh Hefner's legions of Total Assholes." He worries what an intelligent feminist must think of him should she read the poem. Label him "adolescent"? Plenty of older men feel the same way. The poet rambles on, resolving nothing but revealing much about male misreading of female signals. In a book of seventeen poems in less than fifty pages, Halliday covers a lot of ground. Pop culture speaks in its own voice, but in the course of the routine, the author quotes Auden, mimics Hopkins, and echoes Yeats, Eliot, and Frost. In "Why the H G is Holy," the Holy Ghost discovers a slim volume of poetry: "it was your book." "The first poem caused the Holy Ghost to frown; / ah, but not with disdain, rather with curiosity!" The ideal reader is at hand: "The second poem brought a brightening of divine eyes. / And the page was turned as if by a pensive breeze." Halliday may sound cute and too self-conscious, but he holds your attention. He admits that Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton have their place (so much for Western tradition!), but he wants to record the "postmodern and small." "This, also, was not nothing," he protests. The voice of poetry is here, but is in danger of being drowned in its own fluidity. Brevity is the soul of Halliday's wit, even as he loves to run on and on.

In his third poetry collection, *Lower-Class Heresy*,[3] T. R. Hummer plays the storyteller whose voice mixes memory and desire, past and present, inner thoughts and alert observations. He stands "on the edge . . . between myself and the world, / Between landscape and inscape" ("The Moon and Constellations"). Mind and body define the first duality, self and others the next. Poetry walks the edge between the two, with ever-wavering steps trying to keep the balance for poet and reader. Hummer hardly ever hesitates or slips; he is a sure-footed performer in words. First, he knows his own limitations. His stories embody his meaning; he refuses to preach or philosophize. In "Course of Empire," for example, the narrator tells how his VW van slides off the road into a snowbank, leaving him on a pre-dawn road where passing cars ignore him. At last, a man with a brand-new four-wheel pickup stops to help pull him out. By the end of the poem, their plights have been reversed; the Good Samaritan is stuck and the narrator is saved. Without indulging in allegory, the poet eases in his reflections on the Puritan belief in a

[3] LOWER-CLASS HERESY, by *T. R. Hummer*. University of Illinois Press. $9.95p.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

just God, the Christian hope of resurrection, and the modern loss of faith—all as part of the actual crisis and ironic turn of events. In poems like "Inner Ear," "Legal Limit," and "A Clearing in Pennsylvania," he manages to make the reader experience real meaning under the narrative surface. Hummer places himself in the American tradition as an ex-transcendentalist or, in his term, a "subscendentalist," and as a Southern poet and Western writer of local color. "The Ideal" fuses North and South, black and white, past hatreds and present compromises. Grandmother declares that the Yankees cannot "tell us how to run things." Integration is not part of her purview, no more than John Winthrop wanted the poor "in subjection" to change places with the rich and eminent "in power and dignity." The story of the Cardiff Giant, that hoax of the last century passed off as an ossified relic of biblical times, becomes a symbol for Hummer of the petrified thought typically accepted by Americans. "The Real" tells about growing up in a South where "We hated the North, communists, Russians, / Catholics, Negroes, liberals and atheists" and where some of his classmates cheered when John Kennedy died: "I didn't, but I didn't know / If it was right to grieve." Hummer has outgrown his roots and thrown off its stunting force so as to invigorate, even cure, his past shadow-life, "etched white, / Against a pure black wall." This final image of "The Real" sums up the metaphors of print, race, morality, and Hiroshima that run thread-like through the autobiographical tale. Hummer also weaves sexual and religious ironies into his poetry. The book is divided into three parts: "The Subscendentalists," "Dogma," and "The Undersoul." In "Heresies, Overheard," he stands outside a church at night. "And the myths say dark brings evil," but here it brings only the poet, "Strolling the root-heaved sidewalk, happy and going nowhere." By a kind of exorcism, a gift of "amazing grace," he is free of his storytelling and its plots, "self-forgotten, whistling a random tune / Nameless and unrepeatable. . . ." The voices of others recede and only the poet's own is heard. Discover for yourself the "five-pointed shadow" of the poet's writing hand "among the mythic orders" ("The Moon and Constellations"). Hummer writes to be heard.

In her third book of poems, *The Lotus Flowers*,[4] Ellen Bryant Voight has also found her voice as a storyteller. Many of the tales deal with family and neighbors in the farm country of Virginia. Even a dog secretly killing sheep at night while faithfully guarding his own flock by day offers a subject for compactly staged narrative that reflects on the animal instinct to kill and the human need to tame. "Feast Day" recalls the Advent ritual of shooting mistletoe out of trees for Christmas, while "Short Story" describes a grandfather's killing a stubborn mule, a story grown fuzzy in the course of family retelling. Unlike her sister who stays at the homestead each summer ("The Visitor"), the author's life has moved her further away from

[4] THE LOTUS FLOWERS, by *Ellen Bryant Voight*. W. W. Norton. $13.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scenes to which she can return in memory alone and art. Some poems, like "The Riders" and "Good News," view their protagonist from such a distance that it is hard to know what, if anything, has happened. Sometimes purple patches of description distract from the purpose of a story. "Memorial Day," for example, starts out as a description of spotting American redstart warblers:

> In field guides they are always in repose:
> tiny female, olive-gray, so like the local birds;
> the male, shiny black with tailstripes, wingbars,
> "shoulder coloration" such a vivid orange
> I might have recognized him in the elm.

Fair enough, although the words themselves smack of the field guide. The poet elaborates on the mythic theme of the meanings of birds, and the language swells with phrases like "the terrible dark winters of retribution." The author admits: "I am overrun with signs and omens." The impulse to go on writing has taken over, and the poem ends flatly by returning to the guide's description. Like Ammons' poet, Ms. Voight allows herself "to write by the voice" rather than "let the voice find itself" for the poem. More often, however, she has something to say and one can feel the subject guiding the voice in the choice of incidents and detail. "Bright Leaf" is the best thing in poetry or prose that I have read about tobacco picking and curing, the hard lot of both the black workers and the struggling white farmer. "At the Movie: Virginia, 1956" effectively depicts segregation through the eyes of a child who thought the Negroes' balcony seats reflected "a special privilege" because they enjoyed a superior vantage and freedom. Trained as a classical pianist, the author reviews the rise and fall of her vocation in "The Chosen," a poem that embodies music in its story and lines.

As the title of his new poetry collection, *Sabbaths*,[5] suggests, Wendell Berry finds in the days of rest from weekly labor an occasion for poetry and praise of God. Written in a plain style, the poems express the author's dedication to farming, love of nature, and devotion to its Creator. Not afraid to be a catechetical rhymer in the Bay Book of Psalms tradition, Berry follows Herbert and Blake in writing about biblical truths experienced in everyday life. Genesis provides the central theme with the stories of creation, the garden, and the fall, but he also draws upon the psalms and Gospels. In the back of the book, the author even provides notes for some of his allusions. (Unfortunately, these references often do not correspond to the numbers and lines of the poems.) What is most moving in this scriptural dimension is the poet's own transformation by dying in daily hardship and toil to rise in joy and renewal. A poem begins:

[5] SABBATHS, by *Wendell Berry*. North Point Press. $12.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.

Yet human work makes no leaf grow; the real work of growing is done while people sleep. The poem concludes, simply:

When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.

One must admire the poet's sincerity and directness, especially his bold stand in sounding so unfashionably religious. His best poems come as prayers from the heart. However, other poems turn from the meditation genre to that of the sermon. Berry justly laments acid rain, industrial pollution, and bulldozed landscapes, but his lines become peppered with "we's" and moral lessons. Rhythms at times sound too facile and sentiments too plainly obvious. Berry does better when he is more concrete, as in his poem dedicated "To Den" in which he describes the cleared fields and gullied slopes of his farm. He cannot resist a bit of generalizing, even here, about finding a pattern "Out of disordered history" and a vague reference to "the long outline / emerging through the momentary." Of course, there is a place for the pulpit in poetry, as Donne and Hopkins demonstrated. Berry's vision of a world renewing itself in Easter dawns and springtimes extends his Sabbaths beyond his personal Sunday observations written over a seven-year period. As in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, his theme embraces the rituals of life and death. Death as "the narrow gate" seems like a trite image in "To long for what eternity fulfills," but later in "How long does it take to make the woods?" the image re-emerges as a powerful myth for the journey:

Why must the gate be narrow?
Because you cannot pass beyond it burdened.
To come into the woods you must leave behind
the six days' world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes.

The final poem, "Slowly, slowly they return," discovers the true voice of poetry as prayer; it is a magnificent summary of the central metaphor of outspreading trees as "Apostles of the living light" that "build in air / Tier after tier a timbered choir." Finally, the trees redeem us:

Receiving sun and giving shade,
Their life's a benediction made,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And is a benediction said
Over the living and the dead.

In fall their brightened leaves, released,
Fly down the wind, and we are pleased
To walk on radiance, amazed.
O light come down to earth, be praised!

To which the reader can only add: Amen.

C. H. Sisson is another poet whose voice belongs to a formal traditional style without losing its personal conviction and tone. But where Berry sounds an optimistic note, Sisson in *God Bless Karl Marx!*,[6] his first book of verse since his *Collected Poems 1943-1983*, sends a Juvenalian blast against modern political and religious follies. The Church of England's tolerance of theological fudging gets its comeuppance in "To His Grace the Archbishop of York" and "For the Primate of All England." The latter opens with the announcement: "The Archbishop of Nothingness / Blew up a bag of wind one day / In place of a sermon," and goes on to mock the prelate's concern for Africa and South America while ignoring his own befuddled flock. The poem concludes: "Now bus-conductors talk like bishops / And there is Babel in the land!" Prospects for England's spiritual revival look bleak to Sisson when pastors abandon their preaching powers. Those who seek salvation in Marx's message of a new world order meet with similar scorn from the poet's pen. The satiric title poem pictures communism as out of touch with people's real needs. The movement is ruled by "the great sage Abstraction" and "subject to the theoretical gimmicks / Of Marx and others living in a library." Not all is lost, however. "Vigil and Ode for St George's Day" offers an Audenesque testament in the form of a disillusioned cry for faith:

Yet there is truth which we assert
And I myself would die for one
If there were need, as there is none:
Better the world should be inert.

The world would be better off without the follies men weave in the name of religion. Yet Sisson believes that Christ as "The Man of Sorrows is the one / Who represents the way we go," because he knows the agony and comfort of death: "The secrets of mythology / Lie always open in his hands." The author believes in the impossible because he can no longer believe in this world. His only present comfort is to stand in an open field, away from the misguided masses, and speak into the void. Sisson tempers his satire by reminding himself that anyone who speaks for England must speak "for her

[6] GOD BLESS KARL MARX!, *by C. H. Sisson.* Carcanet Press. $9.50p.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gentleness," itself an ambiguous word. "Conclusions" concludes: "Uncertainty remains the end of all." The final image, "night falls stunningly, soon to be day," may be a harbinger of hope or a meaningless cycle of despair. Where Ammons and Berry participate in nature and an unseen world, Sisson by choice or need remains an outsider, an unhappy observer of the scene. It is significant that the most explicit and movingly eloquent confession in the book is a translation of "Thoughts on the Churchyard and the Resting-Places of the Dead" by Andreas Gryphius, a melancholy seventeenth-century German poet. Sisson, who has translated Lucretius, Horace, Virgil, Dante, La Fontaine, among others, feels more at home with the truly great writers of the past than with the semi-great, like Yeats, of the present. In "Up the Arts!" he asks, "Shall we make legends of our silly selves?" At seventy, Sisson has no illusions about his century, his country, or himself. How right he proves to be, as he says, "time will tell." Meanwhile, all he has is a voice against the dark. Born in indignation or in love, the voice of poetry is always a voice of light.

Congratulations to *The Hudson Review*
on your
Fortieth Anniversary

Lou Meyers Press
101 WEST 31ST STREET
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10001
212 • 239-4728

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GARY KRIST

What We Talk about When We Talk about Writing

DON'T LOOK NOW, BUT WE'VE LOST our shared aesthetic orientation. That, at least, is what Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory would have us believe, and to hear them tell it, it's good riddance. "The struggle for greater diversification in fictional forms has been won," they proclaim in the shrewd but somewhat rosy introduction to their new collection of interviews.[1] "Writers no longer feel obliged to develop their work in response to a prior, dominant set of conventions." Instead, the authors of the 1980s have developed a full range of unique literary approaches to convey the multiple realities of contemporary America. "Such diversity of realities and realisms might be frustrating to writers seeking the comforts of a secure literary home and to critics anxious to label and categorize these unruly tendencies, but it suggests that the aesthetic disruptions of the '60s indeed opened up new options for fiction."

Well, yes and no. Certainly the thirteen writers interviewed here represent a fairly wide variety of prose styles and techniques. In fact, one of the great services this book performs is helping to correct the misimpression (created by some of our more curmudgeonly reviewers) that all contemporary literary fictions are about aimless, spiritless deadheads who wander from Wal-Mart to Pizza Hut failing to communicate with each other. McCaffery and Gregory have been remarkably catholic in their selection of interviewees, choosing a pair of science fiction writers, a few New Realists, a writer of "plotless, creative prose," and a lot of people who, if you wanted to make your categories narrow enough, would fall between the aesthetic cracks.

But do these writers of the eighties really have less in common than any similarly chosen group from any other decade? Quick, name one age that didn't look at its full range of literature and see plurality and trendless diversity. The "shared aesthetic orientations" tend to emerge later, after the true complexity of the scene has faded enough for a new generation to come along and shape the shapelessness into a form that will meet its own psychological needs.

[1]ALIVE AND WRITING: Interviews with American Authors of the 1980s, conducted and edited by *Larry McCaffery* and *Sinda Gregory*. University of Illinois Press. $22.50.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Even the canonized writers of the sixties and early seventies—Pynchon, Coover, Gass, Barth, Barthelme, Sontag, Federman, Vonnegut, Reed, and DeLillo—who are described in the introduction as possessing such a shared orientation, seem to me at least as diverse as the group interviewed here. And, really, are any of these allegedly "nontraditional" writers (with the single exception of Ron Silliman) doing anything as nontraditional as, say, Flann O'Brien in the thirties, Samuel Beckett in the fifties, or even Lawrence Sterne in the sixties (the 1760s, mind you)?

Abish, Apple, Beattie, Carver, Delany, Hannah, Hoban, William Kennedy, Le Guin, McGuane, Robbins (Tom, not Harold), Silliman, and Edmund White. That's a strong group of writers by just about any standard, but it's also a group that tends to reinforce my impression that those new options for fiction are actually fewer now than they were twenty or thirty years ago, at least for writers who hope to have anything like a wide audience. Putting aside the fact that ten of the thirteen writers are white males, does this group really represent what Silliman calls a "decentralized literature"? Almost all of them (Silliman again the notable exception, along with Walter Abish in his more experimental mode) are working well within the basic conventions of traditional fiction; their books have characters, plots, and at least a rough narrative logic to carry the reader from beginning to end. This is true despite what some of these writers may say to the contrary. Barry Hannah, for instance, may claim, "I care nothing for plot at all, that should be obvious. I think plot is always phony." Yet I'd wager that there's very little in Hannah's novel *Ray* that would cause Aristotle to grasp his head in vexation.

In fact, the sense I get from reading these interviews—and from reading contemporary novels—is that writers are actually becoming more conservative in technique. They're retreating from the high plain of conceptual experiments (which, admittedly, are often more interesting to read *about* than to read) and regrouping in the forest of traditional storytelling. Consciously or unconsciously, they seem to have decided that character and plot are tools too powerful to ignore, even when the objective is to undermine the assumptions implicit in those tools. Thus we see Walter Abish shuttling from works like "99: The New Meaning" (in which he assembled 99 page 99s from 99 different authors) to the more traditional narrative form of his story "The Idea of Switzerland," or Raymond Carver trading the unresolved plots of his early fiction for the blatantly *shaped* stories in his collection *Cathedral*, or Edmund White turning from the decorative disjuncture of *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* to the smoother narrative of *A Boy's Own Story*.

So maybe we don't lack a shared aesthetic orientation after all. Most of these writers seem to have in common at least a general tendency to use those traditional constructs of "character" and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEW DIRECTIONS BOOKS
SPRING 1988

LEE BARTLETT

William Everson: The Life of Brother Antoninus. A biography of the poet, conscientious objector, priest and husband. $25.00

H. E. BATES

A Party for the Girls: Six Stories. Follows *A Month by the Lake* ("nearly perfect stories"—*Pub. Wkly*) *A Revived Modern Classic.* $19.95 & $8.95

KAY BOYLE

Life Being the Best and Other Stories. Ed. w/intro. by S. W. Spanier. 13 early ironic tales. *A Revived Modern Classic.* $18.95 & $8.95

GAVIN EWART

Selected Poems 1933–1987. A half-century retrospective by Britain's premier comic poet. Toothsomely scathing light verse. $18.95 & $8.95

LARS GUSTAFSSON

The Stillness of the World Before Bach. New Selected Poems. Ed. by Christopher Middleton. Var. translators from the Swedish. $18.95 & $8.95

POUND/LITTLE REVIEW

The Letters of Ezra Pound to Margaret Anderson: The Little Review *Correspondence.* Ed. by Scott, Friedman, and Bryer. Sixth vol. in the series *The Correspondence of Ezra Pound.* $37.50

WILLIAM SAROYAN

Madness in the Family. Ed. by Leo Hamalian. The first publication of his masterly late short stories written in the 60's and 70's. $16.95

GUSTAF SOBIN

Voyaging Portraits. Poems hovering at the precarious limits of language. The newest collection by an American long resident in Provence. $9.95

STENDHAL

The Pink & The Green. Followed by "Mina de Vanghel." Intro. by Michel Déon. Trans. from French w/afterword by Richard Howard. $17.95

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. II, 1939–1962. Ed. by Christopher MacGowan. Companion to *Vol. I, 1909–1939* (1986). $37.00

Please request free catalog

NEW DIRECTIONS 80 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10011

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"plot," and the artificial sense of continuity they create, for the very purpose of subverting that sense of continuity. Listen to White explaining his intentions in the novel *Forgetting Elena*: "I would play upon the traditional novelistic expectations of the reader and would ultimately frustrate those expectations, thereby creating a machine for creating sensation, an abstract configuration that was dynamic, not static, but that was made up of the traditional building blocks of the novel (that is, scene, dialogue, character exchange, suspense, and so on) rather than, as Gertrude Stein had done, by having words cancelling out words."

And White isn't an exception. Here's Max Apple on how he uses a straightforward narrative form to thwart straightforward interpretation: "That's the texture I'm after: given all the same events, there are always many possible interpretations. I don't want to create those single, simple interpretations in my works because you can't do that with the world. So I like the story to be simple in a certain way. . . . I want to be clear and then, through reverberations, pass along in a straightforward narrative that fertile unclarity that's in my mind."

Similar statements appear too often in these interviews to be mere coincidence. Writers are using the familiar trappings of realism—both on the general level of character and plot and on the level of specific *kinds* of character and plot—to undermine the very notion of a familiar, coherent reality. This process is discussed most explicitly in the Abish interview:

> *Abish*: To me, this stability [the political stability of everyday life] is open to exploration. My interest in Germany is not to explain it, but to highlight the German 'signs' that elicit a set response—a German truth—which in my book is either subtly questioned or negated or defamiliarized.
>
> *McCaffery*: This sounds a bit like what Coover does in many of his fictions; you introduce the familiar archetype, the clichéd pattern, in order to undermine it.

Naturally, this sort of subversion is what a lot of literature is (and, to my mind, should be) all about. Good books have always tended to shake up the status quo—to dynamite the received wisdom, the easy explanation, and the complacent moral stance (or, as Barry Hannah eloquently puts it, to "make those middle-class jerks out there shudder or smile"). Straightforward realists go about this task very subtly—often too subtly, if their realism becomes so cozily familiar that nothing whatsoever is called into question. The avant-garde, on the other hand, sometimes falls prey to the Charybdis of that Scylla; their works call so much into question at once—creating an aesthetic experience that is so unfamiliar—that nobody wants to listen (except for the few who are already converted). What's inter-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DISTINCTIVE & DISTINGUISHED
POETS FROM OXFORD

COLLECTED POEMS, 1930-1986
RICHARD EBERHART
444 pp. cloth $29.95

COLLECTED POEMS
CHARLES TOMLINSON
414 pp. paper $14.95

COLLECTED POEMS, 1988
DAVID GASCOYNE
256 pp. paper $14.95

THE COMPLETE POEMS
KEITH DOUGLAS
Edited by **DESMOND GRAHAM**
Introduction by **TED HUGHES**
176 pp. paper $11.95

I'M DEADLY SERIOUS
CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE
72 pp. paper $8.95

SELECTED POEMS
PATRICK LANE
190 pp. paper $12.95

BROKEN MOON
CAROLE SATYAMURTI
64 pp. paper $8.95

SEASONS AND CREATURES
LAURIS EDMOND
56 pp. paper $9.95

SELECTED POEMS
KEVIN IRELAND
112 pp. paper $9.95

DRIVING INTO THE STORM
SELECTED POEMS
IAN WEDDE
112 pp. paper $9.95

At better bookstores or directly from
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
200 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

esting about the writers interviewed here is that they seem to have found a middle path. When they succeed (and not all of them do, and those that do, don't always), they manage to seduce us with a deceptive familiarity at the same time that they're slipping us a metaphysical hotfoot.

This aesthetic technique (if we can actually call it that) comes to the fore whenever the discussion turns to the issue of resolution in fiction. Just about everyone in these pages seems to agree that life in the 1980s is open-ended, disjointed, largely shapeless; all of our gods, after all, have failed us (though Mammon does seem to be making a comeback lately). Our fiction will naturally incorporate those qualities of experience. As Abish puts it: "Why should the novel reveal what, under similar circumstances in life, is not revealed?" It follows, then, that art itself should be open-ended, disjointed, and largely shapeless, right?

Again, yes and no. And this time, mostly no. "Another tiresome, perennially avant-garde question," complains Edmund White, "dithers over the border between life and art. . . . To me the Japanese, who very early on realized this was a dull question, have a much more mature understanding that art *is* artifice and life is life and a confusion of the two is puerile." He's right, of course (except for the part about its being a dull question), and just about all of these writers, judging from their works if not their words, seem to understand that distinction. No matter what they may say here, their works *do* resolve, even when those works are, on one level or another, about irresolution.

The confusion stems from an overly restrictive definition of resolution—and the interviewers must bear most of the blame for introducing that definition into these discussions. Somewhere along the line, they start to equate the act of resolution with that of "providing answers" or sending the reader off with a neat conceptual wrap-up of what went on in a book. While it is true that few of the works of these writers end with Elizabeth marrying Mr. Darcy and living happily beyond the frame of the story, their plots do tend to resolve at least in a musical sense. In most of the fiction I've read by these writers—even the most intellectually open-ended—there is an ultimate confluence of image and idea that conveys a sense of an ending, that creates the impression of a thought completed. Typically, this thought cannot be articulated as what my tenth-grade teacher would call a "theme," but it's there nonetheless, and its presence is crucial to any kind of satisfactory aesthetic experience. Nor does this musical sense of resolution have to be reductive; it doesn't have to violate our sense of the world as lacking clear-cut answers; and it certainly needn't work against the subversive thrust of literary fiction. On the contrary, this musical form of resolution is another of those deceptively traditional elements with which these writers invite our attention while quietly lighting the match under our feet.

Significantly, one of the few interviewed writers who seems to be fighting these notions of shape in fiction is the one whose work I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can hardly bring myself to read any more: "One critic who wanted to put me down said that reading my stories was like watching a dog go round and round until it succeeded in catching its tail. He was saying that my writing lacked structure, and when I read that I thought, 'Wow, he's right.' But I took it as a compliment." This from the redoubtable Ann Beattie, whose other contributions here include such gems as: "I hate writing novels to begin with because I can't remember what the character did five days ago," and the incomparable "I write so fast that I couldn't possibly think about whether or not I'm putting compound or complex sentences into my prose, or whether I'm writing like a dope, or whatever. I mean, we're talking about writing a whole story in two or three hours."

But let's steer clear of the temptation to Beattie-bash. Despite the impression created by this infuriating mush of an interview, the empress is wearing at least enough real clothing to avoid being picked up on obscenity charges. But can we take seriously her claim that she's not editorializing in her books, that she simply throws in whatever details (Skylab, cowboy boots) happen to be surrounding her at the time of composition, or that she's never written anything that has allowed her to "put pieces together"? If so, Beattie the so-called realist may be the most nontraditional writer of the bunch; if we can believe what she tells us, her works may embody the formless, arbitrary quality of life without any aesthetic distance at all.

Forgetting for the moment the fact that using something as potent as fiction simply to "record" the world is like using a Cray supercomputer to play Pac-Man, what's the result of this kind of recreation of life in art? Tedium, if you ask me. A sterile unclarity rather than the "fertile unclarity" that Max Apple is after. Even Raymond Carver, a writer who is still unfairly linked with Beattie by people who have apparently not read *Cathedral*, admits that "just telling it like it is" is an awful bore: "People couldn't possibly read pages of description about the way people *really* talk, about what *really* happens in their lives. They'd just snore away, of course."

Of course. Life may be plotless, but stories about plotlessness needn't be, and the discontinuity of identity is perhaps best explored through characters who have at least some recognizable coherence. There's a fine line between means and ends here, and many of these thirteen writers are walking it successfully, each in his or her own intensely personal way. They have managed to create a readable literature that nonetheless acknowledges the philosophical state of emergency we're living in.

So maybe the editors' introduction isn't too rosy after all; it's just rosy for the wrong reasons. These writers may be working closer to tradition (and to each other) than were many of their predecessors, but there's nothing stale or out-of-touch about what they're accomplishing. They've recognized that character and plot, those old-fashioned and artificial constructs, are still startlingly efficient means of engaging a reader, and that a writer who engages us is not very easy to silence.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

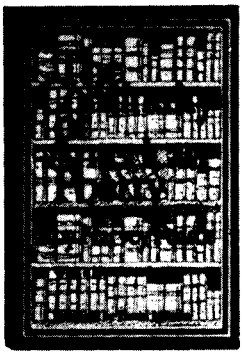
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ALICE BLOOM teaches in the Department of English at the University of Maine in Farmington. . . . The title story of KERMIT MOYER's collection, *Tumbling* (due out from the University of Illinois Press), originally appeared in *The Hudson Review*. Mr. Moyer is an associate professor of literature at The American University in Washington, D.C. . . . CARL WOOTON is a professor of English at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. "A Reconciliation" is his third story to be published by *The Hudson Review*. . . . FREDERICK BROWN's books include *Père Lachaise: Elysium as Real Estate* and *Theater and Revolution*. He teaches at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and is writing a biography of Emile Zola. . . . LOUIS SIMPSON's *From Carentan to Green Harbor: Collected Poems* and *Definite Connections: Selected Prose* will be published by Paragon House in 1988. . . . In 1987 DONALD HALL's book of poems, *The Happy Man*, won the Lenore Marshall/Nation Award. His book-length poem is due out soon from Ticknor & Fields. . . . ROBERT McDOWELL is the author of *Quiet Money*, published by Henry Holt in 1987. He is the editor of Story Line Press and co-editor of *The Reaper*. . . . CHARLES TOMLINSON's most recent book of poems is *The Return*, published by Oxford University Press. He was first published in *The Hudson Review* over thirty years ago. . . . EMILY GROSHOLZ's second book of poems, *Shores and Headlands*, will be published this fall by Princeton University Press. . . . ROBERT S. CLARK's review of the Met's new Ring cyle will appear in the Autumn 1988 issue of *The Hudson Review*.

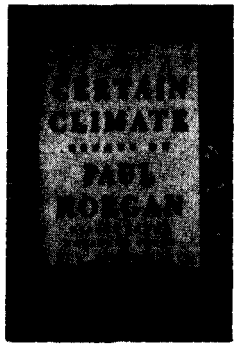
WILLIAM PARK* is Esther Raushenbush Professor of Humanities at Sarah Lawrence College, where GILBERTO PEREZ is professor of film history. . . . HARRY GOLDGAR is a lawyer in New Orleans. A former professor of English and comparative literature, he has been book editor at the Nashville *Tennessean*. . . . DEAN FLOWER's essay on the novels of Anita Desai will appear in an upcoming issue of *The Hudson Review*. . . . WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD's next book will be on Randall Jarrell. . . . JAMES FINN COTTER's translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* was recently published by Amity House. . . . GARY KRIST is the author of *The Garden State*, a collection of stories to be published later this year by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

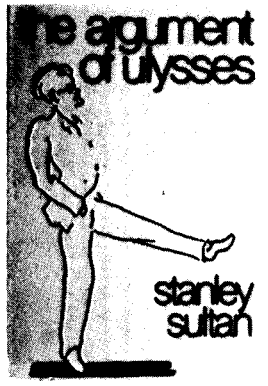
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



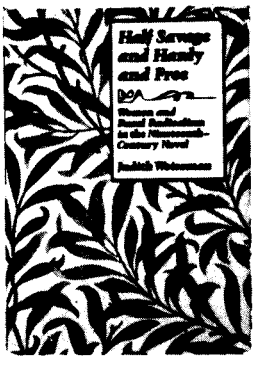
Foreword by David Ignatow
"It literally *moves* one to insight . . . by a kind of tense and heated urgency of involvement with its subject."
– RICHARD FOSTER, *Hudson Review*
$30.00 cloth, $12.95 paper



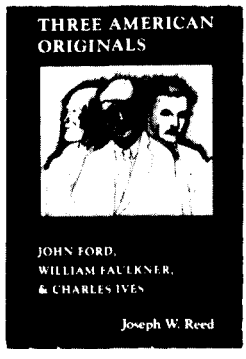
Essays in History, Arts, and Letters
Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner and recipient of *The Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, Paul Horgan adds a reflective work of and about literature to his prolific body of work.
Coming in May,
$16.95 cloth



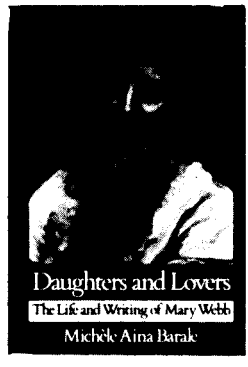
"One is almost tempted to call it that 'last word' on *Ulysses* toward which all previous criticism of Joyce's novel has been striving."
– MAURICE BEEBE, *James Joyce Quarterly*
$30.00 cloth, $14.95 paper



"Written in a vigorous and readable style, Judith Weissman's monograph offers a fresh perspective for feminist criticism."
– *Choice*
$29.95 cloth



"A lively provocative tone . . ." – *Journal of Modern Literature*
"Reed seeks to go beyond the limits of conventional scholarship. . . . I consider it a brilliant and significant work."
– ROBERT LUCID
$25.00 cloth, $12.95 paper



"Thoughtful, perceptive, intelligent, well-written, and – no small point – interesting (even fun) to read . . ."
– LEE EDWARDS, University of Massachusetts at Amherst
$22.95 cloth

At most bookstores.
To order call 1-800-242-7737, or write:
Wesleyan Univ. Press
110 Mt. Vernon St.,
Middletown, CT 06457

WESLEYAN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fiction from
NORTH POINT PRESS

The Diary of a Rapist by Evan S. Connell

The author of *Mrs. Bridge* and *Son of the Morning Star* probes the dark recesses of a rapist's psyche in his third novel, originally published in 1966. Paper, $8.95. Available in June.

The Miracle Hater by Shulamith Hareven

In this absorbing novel, already a classic in Israel, about a loner who left bondage in Egypt, ignorant of the divine plan of the Exodus and scornful of the miracle-making of Moses, "Shulamith Hareven works her own miracle" (Reynolds Price). Paper, $8.95. Available in April.

The Women in Her Dreams by Candace Denning

From the author of *Adventures with Julia*, a touching and comic story about being an identical twin and the confusing boundaries of self, other, and love. Cloth, $16.95. Available in June.

Open Door: Selected Stories by Luisa Valenzuela

Thirty-two rich and varied stories by the author Carlos Fuentes considers "the heiress of Latin American fiction." Paper, $12.95. Available in June.

Solo Faces: A Novel by James Salter

The classic climbing novel by the author of *Dusk* and *A Sport and a Pastime* is "a beautifully composed book that will remind readers of Camus and Saint-Exupéry. It exemplifies the purity it describes" (*The Washington Post.*) Paper, $7.95. Available in June.

North Point Press, 850 Talbot Avenue, Berkeley, California 94706

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED